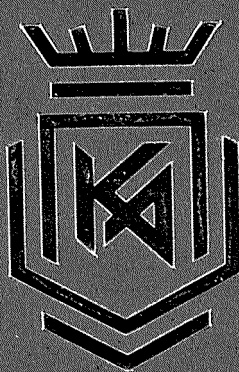


# EXHIBIT 35











## Praise for Tracy Wolff's Crave Series

### #BookTok

"*Covet* is a fun and addictive read, with a plot that will have you hooked."

—**CaitsBooks** on *Covet*

"Damn. That was good."

—**Xenatine** on *Covet*

"It's 3 AM and I'm an emotional wreck."

—**samsreading.addiction** on *Covet*

"Tracy Wolff needs to apologize bc it's been almost 5 months and I'm still crying."

—**Jena.loves.books** on *Covet*

"Yeah. Started this at midnight. Finished at 6:00 AM."

#nosleep #noregrets"

—**MunnyReads** on *Crush*

"A book ending that left me shook."

—**Theemmarae** on *Crush*

"Hudson is a blast. He's a sass master."

—**Twilight\_Talk** on *Crush*

"Twilight in Hogwarts with dragons."

—**books\_and\_crafts** on *Crush*

"Twilight meets Harry Potter meets CW Drama."

—**Heybiancaj** on *Crave*

## More praise for Tracy Wolff's Crave series

An Amazon Best YA Book of the Month: *Crave*, *Crush*, *Covet*

“*Covet* has so many twists and turns you need a roadmap for this thrilling adventure.”

—**Culturess**

“If you still have not read any of the books in the “Crave” series, this is your sign to do so. [A] *Harry Potter* meets *Twilight* fictional book series...”

—**The Charger Bulletin**

“Tracy Wolff continues to combine feminism and fantasy ...”

—**ATX Woman**

“*Covet* is a wild ride from start to finish...setting up a finale that’s truly not to be missed.”

—**Hypable**

★ “The generation that missed *Twilight* will be bitten by this one. Recommended first purchase.”

—**SLJ, starred review**, on *Crave*

“YA Feminist Must-Reads of 2020”

—**Glitter magazine**, on *Crush*

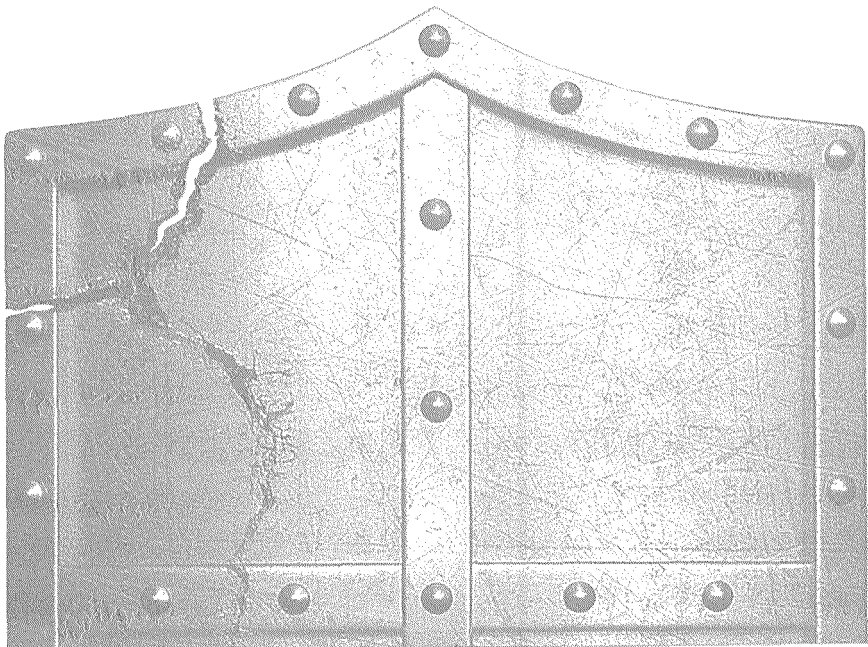
“Throw in some deadly intrigue to mingle with the dark secret Jaxon bears, and you’ve got a recipe for YA vampire success in *Crave*.”

—**Bustle**

“Double the romance, stakes, and the danger has ramped up to some pretty critical levels...”

—**The Nerd Daily**, on *Crush*

c o u r t





ALSO BY TRACY WOLFF

THE CRAVE SERIES

*Crave*

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# c o u r t

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
TRACY WOLFF

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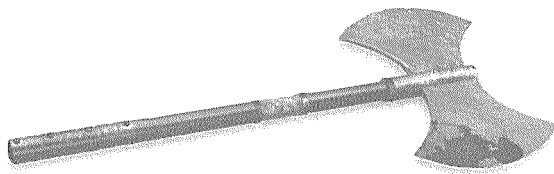


*To Stephanie  
Thank you for saying yes*

At Entangled, we want our readers to be well-informed. If you would like to know if this book contains any elements that might be of concern for you, please check the back of the book for details.

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## Fake It Till It Breaks You —Hudson—



**W**e are totally fucked.  
And if Grace's terrified expression is any indication, she knows it, too.

I want to tell her everything is going to be okay, but the truth is, I'm terrified, too. Just not for the same reasons she is, though I'm not ready to go there yet.

Right now, she's sitting on my couch in front of the fire, her hair wet from her shower, her curls glistening in the flickering light. She's wearing one of my T-shirts and a pair of my sweatpants all rolled up.

She's never looked more beautiful.

Or more defenseless.

Fear threatens to overwhelm me at the thought, even as I tell myself she's nowhere near as defenseless as she looks. Even as I tell myself that she can take anything our fucking world can throw at her.

Anything but Cyrus.

If I've learned one thing about my father, it's that he'll never stop. Not until he gets what he wants and fuck the consequences.

The thought turns my blood cold.

I've never been afraid of anything in my whole miserable life—not of living and definitely not of dying. Enter Grace, and now I live in constant terror.

Terror I'll lose her and terror that if I do, she'll take the light with her. I know what it's like to be in the shadows—I've spent my whole bloody life in the dark.

And I don't want to go back.

"Can I—" I clear my throat and start again. "Can I get you a drink?" I ask, but Grace doesn't respond. I'm not sure she even hears me as she continues to stare at her phone, not wanting to miss a word on Flint. The specialist arrived ten minutes ago to look at him, and the wait to hear if he'll be able to keep his leg has been interminable. I know she wants to be in the infirmary with him—we all do—but when he asked for privacy, we couldn't say no. "Right. Okay. I'll



only be a few minutes,” I tell her, because she wasn’t the only one in desperate need of a shower.

She still doesn’t answer, and I can’t help wondering what she’s thinking. What she’s feeling. She hasn’t said more than a few words since we got back to school and realized Cyrus had tricked us and kidnapped all the students while we were fighting on the island. I just wish I knew what I could do to help her. To reach her before everything goes to hell again.

Because it will. Cyrus’s terrifying new alliances are proof of that. As is his bold kidnapping of the children of the most powerful paranormals in the world. There’s nowhere for him to go from here, nothing for him to do but destroy *everything*.

Not wanting to leave Grace sitting all alone in silence, I walk over to my record collection and riffle through the albums until my fingers land on Nina Simone. I pull the vinyl from the sleeve and place it on the turntable, click a button, and wait as the needle swings out and lowers with a crisp bite of static before Nina’s whiskey voice fills the quiet space. I adjust the volume so it’s more background music, and with one last look at Grace’s still frame, I turn and head to the bathroom.

I take the fastest shower on record, considering the amount of blood and gore and death I need to wash away. I get dressed nearly as fast.

I don’t know why I’m rushing, don’t know what I’m afraid I’ll find when—

My racing heart slows as I see Grace right where I left her. And I finally admit the truth to myself: the reason I haven’t wanted to let her out of my sight is because I’m afraid she’ll realize she made a mistake in choosing me.

Is it an irrational fear, considering she told me she loves me? That she chooses me, even with everything going on, even knowing what a burden my gifts are? Absolutely.

Does that make it go away? Not even close.

That’s the power she holds over me, the power she’ll always hold.

“Any word on Flint?” I ask as I grab a bottle of water from the fridge in the corner and carry it over to her.

“Nothing on the group chat yet.”

I try to hand her the water, but when she doesn’t take it from my outstretched hand, I walk to the other side of the couch and sit beside her, set the water on the table in front of us.

She turns from the fire then, slays me with her wounded gaze, and whispers, “I love you.” And my heart pounds again.

She looks so serious, too serious, and even a little bit desperate. So I do what I always do to pull her out of her own head: I tease her, this time with our favorite movie line. "I know."

When a slow smile touches the edges of the shadows in her eyes, I know I made the right choice. I reach out and pull her onto my lap, relishing the feel of all of her against all of me. I glance down and run my finger along the promise ring I gave her, remembering the vow I made that day, the trembling conviction in my voice as I said those fateful words, and my chest tightens.

"You know," she says, pulling my gaze back to hers, "you said if I ever guessed what promise you made, you'd tell me. I think I've figured it out."

I raise one eyebrow. "Do you now?"

She nods. "You promised to bring me breakfast in bed for the rest of my life."

I snort-laugh. "Doubtful. You are a brat in the mornings."

The first real smile I've seen from her in what feels like forever lightens her face. "Hey, I *resemble* that." Then she laughs at her own joke, and I can't help myself from joining her. It's *so fucking nice* to see her smiling again.

"I know..." she continues, pretending to ponder alternatives. "You promised to let me win every argument?"

I give a full belly laugh at that ridiculous suggestion. She loves arguing with me. The *last* thing she'd ever want is for me to roll over and just let her have her way. "Not likely."

She stills then, blinking up at me. "Are you ever going to tell me?"

She's not ready to hear what I promised before I even knew she would ever love me back. So instead I joke, "Now where would the fun be in that?"

She fake punches me in the shoulder. "I *will* get it out of you one day." She runs her soft hand along the stubble on my jaw, her eyes turning serious again. "I have forever to keep guessing, mate."

And just like that, I'm on fire.

"I love you," I whisper and lean down to brush my lips across hers. Once, twice. But Grace is having none of it. She reaches up and holds my head between her palms, her lashes fluttering across her cheeks just before she demands everything from me. My breath. My heart. My very soul.

When we're both breathless, I lean back and hold her gaze. I could get lost in the depths of her warm brown eyes for an eternity.

"I love you," I tell her again.

"I know," she teases, repeating my words from earlier.

"That smart mouth is going to be the death of me," I murmur and start to

kiss her once more, thoughts of picking her up and carrying her over to my bed dancing through my head. But she stiffens, and I know my thoughtless comment about dying reminded her, reminded us both, of everything we've lost, could still lose.

My heart nearly stops when I see the tears filling her eyes. "I'm sorry," I murmur.

She gives her head a quick shake, like I shouldn't be beating myself up over my slip, but, well, not going to happen. Then she bites her lip, her chin quivering as she tries to hold all the pain she's feeling inside, and for the billionth time, I want to kick myself for always speaking first and thinking second when she's near me.

"Babe, it's going to be okay," I tell her even as everything inside me turns to liquid. Bones, arteries, muscles, all of it just dissolves in the space from one breath to the next, and all I'm left with is what I'll be without Grace. An empty, bleeding shell.

"What can I do?" I ask. "What do you need—"

She cuts me off by placing her small, cold fingers against my mouth.

"Luca died for nothing. Flint's leg, Jaxon's heart, everything... It was all for nothing, Hudson," she whispers.

I pull her back into my arms, hold her while the anguish of what we've survived works its way through her system, her shaking now becoming my own as I know I'm out of excuses.

In this moment, while I hold the girl I love—the girl I would do anything to save—I know my time has run out. The cold hard truth I've spent the last hour doing my bloody best to ignore slams into me and steals my breath.

It's all my fault.

Everything. Every agony, every death, every moment of pain Grace and the others felt on that island—it's all my damn fault.

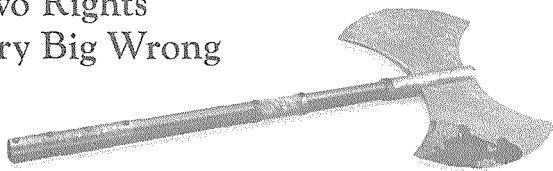
Because I was selfish. Because I didn't want to give her up yet. Because I was *weak*.

I've spent my life running from a destiny my father always wanted for me, but I realize now I have no choice. It's coming for me whether I want it to or not, and there isn't shit all I can do to avoid it. Not a second time. Not with Grace's happiness at stake.

And when I finally surrender to my fate, I'm afraid it will destroy us all.



## Sometimes Two Rights Make One Very Big Wrong



I want to be anywhere but here. Anywhere but standing right here, in the middle of this too-cold room that all but reeks of pain and misery and a heavy dose of antiseptic. I send Hudson a quick smile before turning to face the rest of the gang.

“What do we do first?” Macy speaks softly, but my cousin’s question echoes through the destroyed clinic, bouncing off the empty walls and broken beds like a gunshot.

It’s the million-dollar question, the *billion*-dollar question. And right now, in front of Macy and our friends, I don’t have a clue how to answer it.

To be fair, I’ve been in shock since we showed up at Katmere and found it ransacked, with blood-spattered walls, wrecked rooms, and every single student and professor missing. And now to find out that Flint’s leg couldn’t be saved? I’m devastated, and the fact that he’s trying so hard to be strong only makes it a million times worse.

Now, an hour later, I may be cleaner after my shower, but I am still reeling from the devastation of it all.

Even worse, as I look from one friend’s face to the next—Jaxon, Flint, Rafael, Liam, Byron, Mekhi, Eden, Macy, *Hudson*—it’s clear they’re as shaken as I am. And no one seems to have any more clue than I do about what happens next.

Then again, what is there to do at a time like this, when the entire world as you know it is ending and you’re caught in the middle, watching it crumble brick by brick? At a time when every wall you shore up just leaves an opening for everything else to collapse around you?

It’s not the first time we’ve suffered loss these last few months, but it is the first time since my parents died that everything feels truly hopeless for us all.

Even when I was alone on the Ludares field, I knew things would be okay—if not for me, then for the people I cared about. Or fighting the giants with

Hudson—I always knew he would survive. And when we were on the Unkillable Beast’s island, fighting the vampire king and his troops, I still felt like we had a chance. Still felt like we could somehow find a way to defeat Cyrus and his unholy alliances.

And in the end, when he fled, we thought we had done it.

Thought we had at least won the battle, if not the war.

Thought the sacrifices—the so very, very many sacrifices—we had made had been worth it.

Until we got back here, to Katmere, and realized we hadn’t been fighting a war at all—or even a battle. No, what had been life-and-death for us, what had brought us to our knees and sent us sinking into an abyss of despair, hadn’t been a battle at all. Instead, it had been little more than a playdate, one meant to keep the children occupied while the adults took care of winning the *real* war.

I feel like a fool...and a failure. Because even knowing Cyrus can’t be trusted, even knowing he has a plethora of tricks up his sleeve, we fell for it. Worse, some of us even died for it.

*Luca* died for it, and now Flint has lost his leg.

Judging from the looks on the faces of every single person in the infirmary, I’m not the only one who feels like this. A bitter mix of agony and rage hangs heavy among us. So heavy that there’s barely room to feel anything else—barely room to *think* anything else.

Marise, the school’s nurse practitioner and only surviving person left at Katmere, rests on one of the hospital beds, bruises and cuts still visible on her arms and cheek, which is testament to how hard she must have fought that her vampire metabolism hasn’t healed her yet. Macy brings her a bottle of blood from the nearby fridge, and Marise nods a thank-you before drinking. Helping out the specialist with Flint obviously took what was left of her strength.

I glance at Flint sitting on a hospital bed in the corner with what’s left of his leg propped up, at the pain etched on a face normally stretched wide with a big, goofy grin, and my stomach pitches. He looks so small, shoulders hunched in pain and grief, that I have to fight the rising bile back down my throat. Sheer will is the only thing keeping me upright at the moment—well, that and Hudson as he wraps an arm around my waist, like he knows I’d fall without his support. His hold, his obvious attempt at comfort, should reassure me. And maybe it would, if he wasn’t currently trembling as badly as I am.

Silence stretches taut as a heartstring among the group of us, until Jaxon clears his throat and says in a voice as rough as we all feel, “We need to talk

about Luca. There isn't much time."

"Luca?" Marise asks, heartbreak evident in her raspy words. "He didn't make it?"

"No." Flint's answer is as empty as his eyes. "He didn't."

"We brought his body back to Katmere," Mekhi adds.

"Good. He shouldn't be left on that godforsaken island." Marise tries to say something else, but her voice cracks in the middle. She clears her throat, tries again. "But you're right. There isn't much time."

"Time for what?" I ask, my gaze going to Byron as he pulls a phone from his front pocket.

"Luca's parents need to be notified," he answers as he scrolls. "He has to be buried within twenty-four hours."

"Twenty-four hours?" I repeat. "That seems awfully fast."

"It *is* fast," Mekhi answers. "But if he's not sealed in a crypt by then, he'll disintegrate."

The harshness of his answer—the harshness of this world—has my breath clogging in my throat.

Of course, we all turn to dust in the end, but how awful for it to happen so quickly. Maybe before Luca's parents can even get here to see him. Definitely before any of us can wrap our head around the reality that he is really gone.

Before we can even say goodbye.

"Byron's right," Macy says quietly. "Luca's parents deserve the chance to say goodbye."

"Of course they do," Hudson agrees in a voice that turns the sudden silence into a pulsing wound. "But we can't afford to give it to them."

No one seems to know what to say to that, and instead, we all stare at him, nonplussed. I can't help wondering if I heard him wrong, and judging from the looks on the others' faces, they feel the same.

"We have to tell them," Jaxon states, and it's clear he's in no mood to debate the topic.

"What do you mean?" Macy asks at the same time. She doesn't sound mad, though. Just concerned.

"They need time to take his body to the family crypt," Byron says, but he has stopped scrolling on his phone—either because he finally found Luca's parents' number or because he can't believe what he's hearing. "If we don't call them now, there won't be anything left of him."

Hudson eases his arm from around my waist and steps away, and I can't

help but shiver at the loss of his warmth. “I know that,” he replies, crossing his arms. “But they’re vampires, from the Vampire Court. How do we know we can trust them?”

“Their son is dead.” Flint’s voice crackles with indignation as he struggles to stand. I can’t believe he’s up and moving already, but shifters heal fast, even under the most dire of circumstances. Jaxon turns to help him, but Flint throws his hand out in a silent *back the hell off*, though his gaze never leaves Hudson’s. “You can’t really think they’ll take Cyrus’s side?”

“Is the idea truly that surprising?” Hudson’s face is blank when he turns to Jaxon. “You barely survived your last encounter with our *own* father.”

“That’s different,” Jaxon snarls.

“Why? Because it’s Cyrus? You actually believe he’s the only one who thinks that way?” Hudson arches a brow. “If he was, there wouldn’t have been so bloody many people to fight on that island.”

Silence stretches until Eden says, “It pains me, but I think Hudson’s right.” She shakes her head. “We don’t know if we can trust Luca’s parents. We don’t know if we can trust *anyone*.”

“Their son is *dead*,” Flint repeats emphatically, his gaze narrowing on Eden’s. “They need to know while they still have time to bury him. If you’re all too chickenshit to do it, I will.” He nails Hudson with a heated glare. “Ever think we wouldn’t have to notify them at all if you had done your job?”

I gasp as the words ricochet through my body like a physical blow. It’s obvious he means Hudson’s ability to disintegrate our enemies with a thought, and I want to rage at Flint that he’d even *suggest* such a thing, let alone expect it, but I also know he’s hurting, and now isn’t the time.

Hudson’s gaze darts to mine, and instead, I try to reassure him with a look that it’s not his fault. But quick as lightning, he focuses back on Flint and throws his arms wide in disbelief. “I was there fighting, same as you.”

“But it’s not the same, now, is it?” Flint raises a brow. “You act like you gave everything you had to that fight, but we all know that’s not true. Why don’t you ask yourself: If it had been Grace about to die, would we be having this conversation at all, or would Luca still be alive?”

Hudson’s jaw clenches. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, you keep telling yourself that.” And with that, Flint uses the edge of the bed to hop over to a pair of crutches in the corner. He shoves them under his arms and shuffles out without another word.

Hudson doesn’t say anything. No one does.

My chest squeezes tight at the choices he has to make, the expectations placed on his shoulders. Expectations too heavy for *anyone* to carry. And yet he does. Always.

But that doesn't mean he has to do it alone.

I pull him back into my arms and lay my head against his chest, close my eyes, and listen to his steady heartbeat until his shoulders start to relax, until his lips brush a faint kiss against my hair. Only then do I sigh. He's going to be okay. *We're* going to be okay.

But when I open my eyes, my gaze lands on our friends, and my breath catches.

Regret. Anger. *Accusation*. It's all there—and directed at Hudson and me.

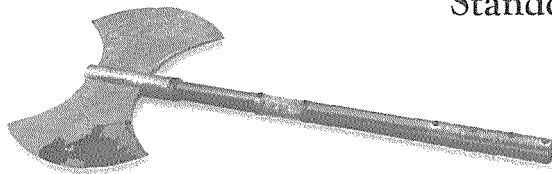
It's then that I recognize Cyrus's real victory today.

We're divided.

Which is just another way of saying we are completely screwed. Again.

## 2

## Standoff and Deliver



With those dark emotions flashing over their expressions, the Order shifts so that they're all standing at Jaxon's back as he faces off against Hudson. My stomach does a quick, unpleasant flip. This is shaping up to have all the makings of an Old West showdown, and I have no interest in getting caught in the crossfire. Or watching anyone else get caught, either.

Which is why I step into the empty space between Jaxon and my mate. Hudson makes a displeased sound low in his throat, but he doesn't try to stop me. I consider defending Hudson's choices on the battlefield, but in the end, I figure what we need to do first is focus on Luca. The minutes are counting down until he turns to dust.

I promise myself we *will* have this conversation about what everyone expects Hudson to do in a fight, but not today. We have enough issues as it is.

"Look, Jaxon, I get it." I hold a placating hand out to the boy who once meant everything to me. "This sucks. It *really* sucks. But you have to see how risky it is to invite Luca's parents here."

"Risky?" He shoots me a disbelieving look as he holds his arms out in a very similar gesture to what Hudson just did. Apparently, blood really does tell. "What else do you think they can do to this place? In case you haven't noticed, it's gutted."

"Not to mention the fact that if they want to attack us, they don't have to wait for an engraved invitation," Byron chimes in. "We're not exactly fortified right now."

"Yeah, but they don't know that we're here," Eden says as she walks forward to stand beside Hudson. "For all they know, we showed up, saw this destruction, and took off for parts unknown. Which, I have to admit, feels a little bit like what we *should* be doing."

"I can notify Luca's parents." Marise sits up in the hospital bed, and though

she is still pale, her wounds are finally starting to heal. "While you guys go somewhere safer, somewhere off campus."

"We're not leaving you, Marise." Macy sounds firm as she walks over to Marise's side near the Order. "If we leave, you're coming with us."

"I'm not strong enough for that just yet," the vampire healer tells her.

"Which means we're not going anywhere until you are," Macy replies. "Besides, they left you for dead, so they obviously know you're on our side. They're just as likely to come after you when they know you're alive as they are to come after us."

"They won't hurt me," Marise says, but even she doesn't sound convinced.

"We're not leaving you," I reiterate and cross to the fridge and get another bottle of blood for her. She takes it, drinking a healthy amount before she sets it on the table beside her bed.

"Luca's parents have the right to know," Jaxon says again, but the latent aggression drains from his stance a little more with each word. "Whether they're traitors or not, they deserve the chance to bury their child. Whatever comes from inviting them here, whatever problems it causes, we'll deal with it. Because denying them that..." He closes his eyes, shakes his head. "Denying them that—"

"Makes us no better than Cyrus," Hudson finishes, sounding as resigned as Jaxon looks.

"Some things are worth the risk," Mekhi says. "Doing what's right is one of them."

Eden bites her lip, and it looks like she's going to argue, but in the end, she just shoves a frustrated hand through her hair and nods.

Jaxon waits to see if anyone else wants to chime in, glancing from one of us to the other. Thankfully, Hudson's acquiescence seems to have convinced everyone. When no one says anything, Jaxon turns to Marise. "I'll make the call."

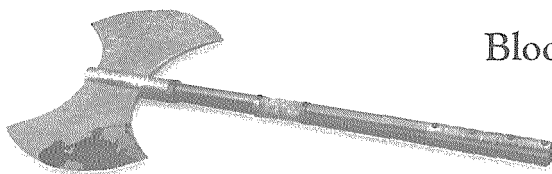
Then Jaxon takes out his phone and fades across the room to the door and the hallway beyond.

"Now what?" Macy asks in a voice that sounds as shaky as I feel.

"Now we wait," Hudson answers, his eyes on the door Jaxon just disappeared through. "And hope we're not making a huge mistake."



## 3

One Hell of a  
Bloodside Manner

Twenty minutes later, Flint is back on his hospital bed and pissy as hell as Marise prepares to start his wound care as the specialist instructed.

"Wait right here," she tells him. "I need to get more bandages."

"And here I thought I was going to climb Denali," he answers in a strained attempt at irony. She just shakes her head as she walks haltingly to a cabinet in the far corner of the infirmary—a sure sign that she's still not feeling nearly as good as she'd like us to believe.

Jaxon and the Order left to deal with Luca, and she'd insisted I bring Flint back so she could check on his leg. I figured Hudson would leave, too, once Flint shot him a death glare as soon as he reentered the infirmary. But to his credit, Hudson stayed. Of course, he's currently leaning against a wall and pretending to scroll through his phone, but he is here, being as supportive as Flint will let him.

Watching Flint trying to be brave in the face of everything he's lost, an all-too-familiar panic twists my stomach, and I drag a slow, deep breath into my lungs. Exhale. Then breathe in again.

Marise unlocks the glass cabinet and shuffles several pill bottles around until she finds what she's looking for. "Here, it's time for more pain medication," she tells him, walking back and handing him two blue pills.

After Marise cleans the wound and starts the tedious process of re-bandaging it, Macy and Eden ask her questions about the attack.

"I'm sorry, girls," Marise says after offering no new information to yet another volley of questions. "I wish I had more answers for you."

Macy and Eden exchange a look before Macy replies, "No, no. It's fine. You were fighting for your life—we understand. Not the best time to ask questions. We just wish you knew *something* that would help us figure out our next move."

"Well, I think you kids should just stay at Katmere where you're safe," Marise answers as she scoops up the used bandages. "No sense getting caught and giving

Cyrus an opportunity to steal your power, too.”

“Wait, Cyrus kidnapped the kids to have leverage against their parents, force them to do his bidding,” Eden says, her eyebrows shooting up. “Didn’t he?”

I lean forward. Have we all gotten it wrong?

Marise shrugs and looks back down at Flint’s leg. “I don’t know anything about that, but I overheard one wolf talking about needing young magic to power something.”

I gasp and shake my head at no one in particular. *No, no, no. That can’t be right.*

“He kidnapped them to steal their magic?” Macy’s voice breaks on the last word, her eyes widening in terror. “But our magic is tied to our soul. If Cyrus is trying to siphon it, he’ll end up killing them!”

I glance over at Hudson to see if he’s hearing this as well and am not surprised to notice him staring intently at the older vampire, his eyes narrowed in thought.

“I’m sorry,” Marise says as she turns to drop Flint’s bandages in a nearby medical waste bin. “That’s all I know.”

Macy asks something else, but I can’t hear anything over the roaring in my ears. When we got to school and realized Cyrus had kidnapped the entire student body, it horrified all of us. But still, in the back of my mind, I think we all figured he wouldn’t actually kill them. I mean, it’s hard to use them for leverage against their parents if they’re dead, right?

But now, realizing he might only want them for their magic, that he has no need to keep them alive after he’s taken what he wants from them, I can’t believe I took the time for a shower. Or—oh my God—actually *made out* with Hudson while students might be dying.

I glance up at my mate, then wish I hadn’t because I know my thoughts are written across my face. The remorse. The shame. The *horror*.

His jaw tenses before he catches himself, but then his face goes completely blank as he registers how upset I am. Regret settles in my stomach, making it twist and churn. Because no matter how devastated this realization makes me, it’s nothing compared to what Hudson is certainly feeling. Not after everything Flint accused him of earlier.

Oh, he tried to pretend like it was no big deal, tried to pretend that Flint’s words rolled right off his back. Which might not have bothered me so much if he was just fronting to the others. But he’s doing it with me as well, and that, more than anything else, tells me just how devastated he is.

Hudson and I don't pretend with each other—we never have. Not when I first unfroze us, when he was locked in my head and it was impossible for us to hide stuff from each other. And not now that he's out, either, because that's not who we are together. We tell each other the truth, even when it's hard. So if he's so far gone that he's hiding from me, things are bad. Really, really bad.

Fear turns my blood to ice, and I begin to make my way across the room to him. He needs to know this isn't his fault, needs to understand that none of this can be laid at his door. But before I can, Marise starts giving Flint a litany of instructions about his leg.

As she does, we all crowd around the bed, wanting to know what—if anything—we can do to help. Even Hudson puts his phone down, though he doesn't make a move to get closer to the bed or Flint.

Eventually, though, there are no more questions to ask. There's only the knowledge that regardless of how much we wish this isn't happening, there's nothing we can do but support Flint.

Because the truth is, no matter how much power you have, sometimes broken things have to stay broken, even though we might wish otherwise.

"I'm so sorry this happened to you," Macy tells him as she rubs a soothing hand down his arm. "But we'll do everything we can for you. We can take you to the Witch Court; the healers can make you a prosthetic—"

"Are these the same witches who just tried to kill us?" he answers caustically.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, tears blooming in her eyes. "I didn't mean—"

Flint mutters under his breath, shakes his head. "Ignore me. I'm in a foul mood."

"Yeah, well, if anyone has the right to be..." Macy blinks back her tears. "It's definitely you."

I feel a little voyeuristic to just be standing here watching Flint suffer, so I turn my back as Marise tells him, "And on the plus side, you're healing well, even faster than shifters normally do. Your wound is already nearly sealed, and I expect the skin to finish healing completely in the next twenty-four hours. In the meantime, you'll need an antibiotic and some extra bandages."

Eden moves closer and bumps his shoulder with her own. "You're going to be okay," she says fiercely. "We'll make sure of it."

"Yeah, we will," Macy agrees.

"I can't believe this is happening," I whisper to no one in particular, and then Hudson is beside me, his hands turning my shoulders so I face him.

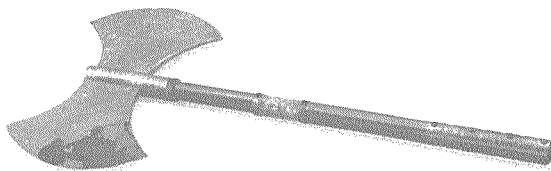
"Flint *is* going to be okay," he says. "*Everything* is going to be okay."

I raise a brow at him. “It would be really nice if I actually thought you believed that.”

Before he can think of something else to say, Jaxon comes back in the room, stopping on the other side of Flint’s bed.

“Luca’s parents are leaving now.” His face is grim, his eyes infinite pools of grief. “They’ll be here by morning.”

## 4

Too Close  
for Closure

“**Y**our dad is draining the kids of their magic and could be killing them,” I blurt out. Probably not the best way to deliver the news to Jaxon, but, well, it definitely chases the grief from his eyes fast. What is burning there now is a white-hot fury that sends a chill down my spine.

“I will kill him with my bare hands,” Jaxon bites out, and he looks like he means to do so right this minute.

“Let’s play Who Gets to Kill Father Dearest First in the morning,” Hudson drawls. “I think what we all need is sleep, or no one is going to be getting killed except us.”

Everyone grumbles, but we know he’s right. I feel like I’m about to fall over from exhaustion. Marise makes a few attempts to get us to promise not to do anything rash, but the best Jaxon will agree to is not to leave before morning. He waits until Flint is back up on his crutches, and then he and the Order head to their rooms.

As we all file out the door behind them, Hudson wraps an arm securely around my waist and fades us to the stairs leading to his room in a blink. I have to admit, sometimes the whole fading thing really comes in handy—especially since we were moving so fast, it made it impossible to catalog all the damage Katmere Academy sustained in the attack. I know I’ll have to look eventually, but right now, I’m not sure I’m up for seeing just how much Cyrus’s minions managed to destroy of this place I’ve come to call home.

Hudson sets me gently on my feet beside the bed, his gaze bouncing around the room, looking anywhere but at me. “You need to get some sleep. I’ll take the couch so I don’t disturb you.”

“Disturb me? As if you ever could.” He might be standing in front of me, but I can’t help noticing the elephant wedged between us. “Hudson, we should talk about what happened in the infirmary.”

"What's there to talk about?" he answers grimly. "It is what it is."

I lay a gentle hand on his arm. "I'm so sor—"

"Grace, stop." He sounds firm but not angry. And not nearly as wrecked as I feel.

"Why are you acting like this?" I ask, hating how needy I sound. Hating even more how needy and uncertain I *feel*. "What's wrong?"

He gives me a *seriously?* look. And I get it—*everything's* wrong. But that's nothing new. That's not us. That's just everything around us. Except...

Except when he's acting like this, it feels an awful lot like it might be us after all.

I'm not okay with that, not after everything we've been through to get here. And I'm definitely not okay with him just pulling away to lick his wounds, instead of sharing his concerns with me.

"Hudson, please," I say, trying to reach for him. "Don't do this."

"Don't do what?" he asks.

It's my turn to give him a look. And it must hit home because his jaw tightens, and suddenly he's very, very interested in the wall directly behind my head.

"Talk to me," I whisper, moving closer and closer, until our bodies are nearly touching and we're breathing the same air.

He stays where he is for one second, two, then takes a deliberate step back. And it slices like a knife. "I don't have anything to say."

"I guess there really is a first for everything," I try to tease, hoping to get a reaction out of him. Hoping to bring back the Hudson who's too sure of himself, too cocky for his own good.

He looks at me then, finally, and as I look back, I feel myself drowning in the endless infinity of his oceanic gaze—the endless infinity of him.

But the closer I look, the more aware I become that he's drowning, too. And no matter how hard I try, he won't let me toss him a life preserver.

"Let me help you," I whisper.

He gives a sad little half laugh. "I don't need your help, Grace."

"Then what *do* you need?" I grab on to him, burrow close. "Tell me what it is, and I'll find a way to give it to you."

He doesn't answer, doesn't wrap his arms around me, doesn't so much as move. And just like that, fear is a snarling beast deep within me, desperately clawing at my insides to get out.

Because this isn't my Hudson. This is a stranger, and I don't know how to bring him back. I don't even know how to find him under all that ice. I just

know that I have to try.

Which is why when he begins to move back again, I hold on tight. I clutch his shirt in my hands, press my body against him, keep my gaze locked on his. And refuse to let go.

Because Hudson Vega is mine, and I am not going to lose him to the demons buried inside him. Not now, not ever.

I don't know how long we stay like that, but it's long enough for my throat to tighten. Long enough for my palms to go damp. More than long enough for a sob to rise in my chest.

And still, I don't look away. Still, I don't let him go.

And that's when it happens.

Jaw clenched, throat working, he slides his fingers around the back of my neck and fists his hand in my hair. Then tugs my head back, eyes still locked with mine, and says, "Grace," in a voice so raw and anguished, it has my whole body tensing in anticipation and despair.

"I'm sorry," he tells me. "I can't— I don't—"

"It's okay," I answer even as I cup his cheek in my hand and pull his head down to mine.

For a moment, I think he's going to pull away, that he doesn't want to kiss me after all. But then he makes a sound low in his throat, and just that easily, all the fears and the failures slip away in the frantic, frenzied crush of his lips against my own.

One moment I'm trying to crack him open, and the next I'm drowning in sandalwood and amber and hard, solid male.

And nothing has ever felt so good. Because this is Hudson, *my* Hudson. My mate. And even when things go wrong, *this* is so, so right.

As if to prove it, he nibbles along my lower lip, his fangs scraping the sensitive skin at the corners of my mouth, and I can't help but lose myself in the heat of his dark and desperate heart.

"It's okay," I murmur as his fingers clutch at my back and his trembling body strains against my own. "Hudson, it's okay."

He doesn't seem to hear me—or maybe it's just that he doesn't believe me—as he deepens the kiss and breaks the world, and me, wide open.

Lightning strikes, thunder crashes, and I swear all I can hear is him. All I can see or feel or smell is him, even before he slides his tongue along my own.

He tastes like honey—sweet, warm, dangerous. It's addictive, *he's* addictive, and I moan, giving him everything that I can. Giving him everything that he wants and begging him to take more. So much more.



We're both gasping when he finally pulls away. I try to hang on a little longer, try to keep the connection between us from slipping away. Because as long as he is wrapped up in me—in us—then he's not locked in his head, destroying himself for something he can't, and shouldn't, change.

Eventually, he pulls back, but I'm not ready to let him go. I keep my arms locked around his waist, my body pressed against his. *Just a little longer*, I plead silently. *Just give me a few more minutes of you and me and the oblivion I feel when we're touching.*

He must feel my desperation—and the fragility I'm working so hard to hide—because he doesn't move.

I wait for him to say something witty or sarcastic or just plain ridiculous in the way that only he can, but he doesn't say a word. Instead, he just holds me and lets me hold him.

And—for now—it's enough.

We've been through so much in the last twenty-four hours. Fighting giants, escaping prison, that horrible battle, losing Luca and nearly losing Jaxon and Flint, finding Katmere wrecked. Part of me thinks it's amazing we're still standing. The rest of me is just grateful that we are.

"I'm sorry," Hudson whispers again, his breath hot against my face. "I'm so sorry."

A powerful shudder rocks his long, lean frame.

"For what?" I ask, pulling back so I can see his face.

"I should have saved him," he says as our gazes collide and his voice breaks. "I should have saved them all."

I can see the guilt eating him alive, and I won't allow it. I can't. "You did nothing wrong, Hudson," I tell him firmly.

"Flint was right. I should have stopped them."

"By *stopped them*, you mean disintegrated hundreds of people on the spot?" I ask, brows raised.

He tries to turn away, shamefaced, but I hold him tightly. I've carried this kind of guilt and pain ever since my parents died, and it's not exactly fun. No way am I going to stand here and let Hudson do the same. Not if I can help it.

"What were you supposed to do?" I ask him. "Make Cyrus and everyone else against us just"—I shake my head, searching for the right words—"disappear into thin air?"

"If I had, Luca would still be alive. Flint would still have his leg. And Jaxon and Nuri—"

“Could you have done it?” I ask, because I felt his confusion at the beginning of that battle, felt him struggling to get control of himself and the situation as mayhem rained around us. “In the beginning, when everything was such a mess, could you have done it?”

“Of course I could have—” He breaks off, runs a hand through his hair. “I don’t know. Everything was so close and chaotic. And when Jaxon threw himself right in the middle of it all...”

“You threw yourself in the middle right with him. Because you couldn’t take the risk of missing and hurting him or the others. And you would rather have died yourself than let anything happen to Jaxon.”

“Well, you saw him,” Hudson drawls, and for a moment, he sounds like his old self. “The kid obviously needs protection. The second I turn my back, he goes and gets his heart ripped out of his chest.”

“I’m not sure that’s quite what happened,” I say with a snort. “But I know you would do anything to protect him and me. I also know you would do anything to protect the others, too. You didn’t disintegrate everyone at the beginning because you couldn’t be sure you wouldn’t get one of us. And once you were sure, once you did figure things out, you threatened to do so and would have, I’m sure.”

He stares at the wall over my shoulder again. “You don’t understand. No one does. It’s not that simple.” He sighs. “I hate this thing inside me.”

“I know you do.” I slide my hands from his waist and cup his face, wait patiently until his eyes meet mine again. “But I also know if Cyrus and the others hadn’t left when you warned them, you would have made every single one of them cease to exist, and you would have done it for us. I have no doubt that you would have done it if it meant keeping us safe.”

His gaze holds mine as he admits, “To keep *you* safe, I would have done anything.”

But I’m not buying it. Hudson loves me, I know that, but I don’t think even he realizes how much he would sacrifice for everyone else, not just me. “To keep *everyone* safe.”

He shrugs, but I can feel him relax just a tiny bit this time. So I wrap my arms around him again and hug him even tighter, do my best to show him that I have faith in him even when he doesn’t have faith in himself.

“Either way...” Hudson coughs and adds, “Before we go up against Cyrus again, I need to talk to Macy about how to counteract a sense spell.”

“A sense spell?”

“That had to be what Cyrus used,” he continues. “Cyrus had the witches do

something to the whole group of them—I'm almost sure of it. Which is why, when I tried to persuade his troops to back off, they didn't so much as acknowledge me. It was like..."

"They didn't hear you at all?" I finish for him.

"Yeah." He shakes his head in disgust—whether at himself or his father, I don't know. "I should have expected him to do something like that."

"Because you're omniscient?" I ask sarcastically. I get why he's blaming himself—he's Hudson, and he takes the weight of the world on his shoulders whether it belongs there or not—but enough is enough. "Or because you're a god?"

His turbulent blue eyes narrow just a little in annoyance. "Because I know my father. I know how he thinks. And I know he'll stop at nothing to get what he wants."

"That's right," I tell him. "*He'll* stop at nothing. Which means everything that happened on that island is because of him, not you."

Hudson starts to argue with me but quiets again at the arch look I give him. This time he knows I'm right, whether he wants to admit it or not.

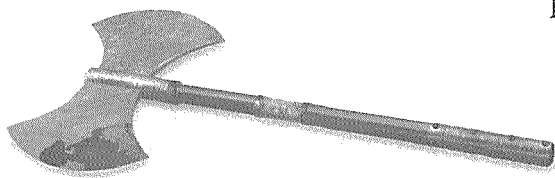
We stay that way for what feels like an eternity, eyes locked, bodies pressed together, everything we've seen and done settling like wet cement between us. I just wish I could be sure it was binding us together and not forming a wall.

Because this war is far from over. We've got a long road ahead of us if we hope to save the kids before Cyrus kills them, and there are no guarantees that it will end the way we want it to.

No guarantees that anything will ever be okay again.

Which is why I take a deep breath and tell him the fear that's been plaguing my mind since we got back to Katmere. "I don't think the Crown is what we thought it was."

## 5

Dream a Little  
Scream of Me

Hudson looks at my palm, and I can all but see a million different thoughts and scenarios running through his head as he tries to figure out how to respond. In the end, he only says, “Just because you haven’t found its power yet doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.”

“Maybe not,” I agree doubtfully. “But I’m pretty sure I would feel *something* if I had a new power.”

“Just like you knew you were a gargoyle when you first arrived at Katmere?” he asks with a raised brow.

The question makes my stomach hurt, so I shove it—and any potential answers—down as deep as I can manage. It’s far from the best solution, but until the Unkillable Beast decides to wake up and answer some questions for me, I’m pretty much stuck. No use freaking out for the next several hours if I can avoid it. Especially not when I really, really need to sleep.

“We’ve got time to worry about the Crown later,” Hudson says. He loosens his arms around my waist and turns me toward his large bed that looks like heaven to my tired eyes. Hudson presses a kiss to the top of my head. “Why don’t you crawl in?”

I’m too exhausted to do much more than follow his suggestion and climb into the bed, pulling the sheet and comforter over me as he heads toward the bathroom. Almost immediately, I find my eyes closing despite my determination to wait for Hudson. It only takes a minute before I’m drifting in a kind of fog, pictures of the battle we’ve all lived through flashing in my head in what feels like a never-ending montage of half memories and half dreams.

I shift as images of Luca dying mix with memories of being trapped in prison. Blood from Flint’s leg covering my hands, Remy’s swirling silver eyes telling me he’ll see me again soon. I twist around, trying to figure out where I am. My heart is racing. Am I still in prison? Did I dream we got free, that we saved the

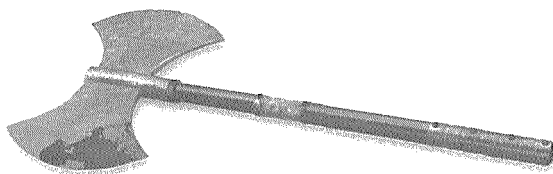
Unkillable Beast—*no, a gargoyle*, my groggy mind reminds me.

*Worried, Grace. So worried.*

The older gargoyle's voice slides into my mind, slipping between the images that are still flashing in my brain. I slog through my consciousness, but each second pulls me further under, like I'm stuck in quicksand.

*No time, no time.* His voice is more frantic than ever, punching through the fog. And then more clearly than he's ever spoken to me, like he's concentrating on every word: *Wake up, Grace! We're almost out of time!*

## 6

Snap, Crackle,  
and Pop-Tart

The command in his voice has me shooting upward in bed. My heart is beating fast, my blood roaring in my ears, and it almost feels like I'm waking up in the middle of a full-blown panic attack. Except my brain is clear, and the adrenaline coursing through my body has everything to do with urgency and nothing to do with fear.

I glance at Hudson, but for once, he's actually asleep. His breathing is even, the faint bruises on his cheek a stark reminder of everything he's been through the last couple of days. Most of the marks from his fights in the prison have faded already, but it's going to take more than just blood to erase the exhaustion under his eyes. I reach out, trace a tender, trembling finger along his cheek. His eyes flutter for a moment, and I'm afraid I've woken him. But then he rolls over with a sigh and falls straight back to sleep.

Too bad I'm not going to be able to do the same.

A quick glance at my phone tells me that I've been asleep a little more than seven hours—which means I've got a handful of hours left before morning. As I roll out of bed, the sun is beginning to peek over the top of Denali. It's the middle of the night, but in Alaska in spring, sunrise comes at four a.m.

Shades of red and dark purple paint the sky and mountains visible through the half windows in Hudson's room. It's beautiful, no doubt, but the shadow of what looks to be an approaching storm also feels ominous as fuck. Like the sky is bleeding onto the mountains, washing the whole world in blood and regret and fear.

Then again, that could just be me transferring my own feelings. God knows, it feels like my whole world is washed in blood right now.

I think about going back to bed, trying to get some more sleep. But that ship has sailed. And since I have no desire to put my dirty clothes back on, I need to get to my room and grab an extra change before we leave.

My stomach shimmies as I head up the stairs and into Katmere's battered main halls, remembering the first time I walked through this school, wandering these halls because my whole life had changed in the blink of an eye and I couldn't sleep.

It feels like I'm on the edge of another precipice, one that's crumbling a little more with each step I take. So much has changed since that first night—my gargoyle, Hudson, Jaxon, even Katmere itself—and yet it feels like some things haven't changed at all.

Like the chances that a couple of homicidal wolves show up and want to toss me in the snow again really aren't that low.

Telling myself I'm being ridiculous—Cyrus is unlikely to send the wolves after us now that he's got the students—I nevertheless take the stairs two at a time on my way up to my room. If the enemy is somehow going to invade, I'd at least like to be wearing pants when I face them.

Macy's sound asleep when I get to our room, so I creep in as quietly as I can. I use my phone light to see, once again cursing the fact that, gargoyle or not, I don't have eyes like the vamps and wolves and can't see in the dark.

I keep my light pointed down—showing just enough that I don't trip and land on Macy's sleeping form by accident—as I head to my closet.

I grab my black Katmere backpack and stuff it with a few things I'll need if I'm staying in Hudson's room. A pair of jeans and an extra T-shirt, some underwear, my toiletry bag, a handful of elastic hair bands, and—surprise, surprise—a box of cherry Pop-Tarts. If I've learned nothing from the last seven months of hanging out with vampires in unpredictable times, it's that if I want to make sure I don't starve, I should always pack a snack.

Once I've shoved it all inside the bag, I throw on a hoodie as well before plopping down on the floor and pulling on socks and my favorite pair of boots.

I get back up and take one last glance around the room to make sure I'm not forgetting anything important, then remember two things I would never want to leave without. I creep over to my jewelry box on my dresser, tilt the lid open, and grab the diamond Hudson gave me as well as the necklace from Jaxon. I shove both treasured items into the front zipper pouch as well as a tube of pink lip balm Macy gave me and sling the backpack over my shoulder before tiptoeing toward the door.

As I'm leaving, Macy stirs a little bit and whimpers in her sleep. I freeze, waiting to see if she needs me, but after another soft sound of distress, she settles back into the snuffle snores I've grown used to over the past several months.



The sound makes me long for the time when I first arrived at Katmere, before everything got so crazy and my biggest worry was just how loud my cousin could snore—which was very. The feeling has me glancing between Macy and my bed, wondering if maybe I *could* steal a few more hours of rest...after all, it might be the last chance any of us can get for a real night's sleep in who knows how long.

I don't even bother kicking off my boots—just curl up on top of the covers, snuggle into the pillow, and let the rhythm of Macy's snores lull me asleep.

*No time!*

A voice in my head startles me awake. I check my phone—I slept another two hours. Macy is still snoring softly, but I know sleep is no longer possible for me.

Maybe if I'm lucky, I can slip back into Hudson's room without waking him up, either.

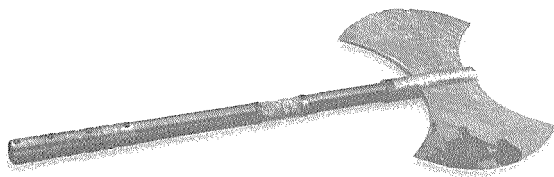
I've barely gotten to the top of the stairs before the Beast's voice is in my brain again. *No time. No time. No time.*

*No time for what?* I ask in the back corner of my mind. *Are you all ri—*

I break off as I round the landing and find the gargoyle in human form sitting at the broken chess table at the bottom of the stairs, one of only a few surviving chess pieces in his hand.

A sickening wave of déjà vu slides through me as I realize that the piece he's holding is none other than the vampire queen herself.

## Say What?



I state the obvious. “You’re human again.” He nods as I take my time walking down the last couple of steps between us. I’m trying to get my head around what’s going on here, but I’m lost. I have no idea what to say to the Unkillable Beast, no idea how to treat him. He’s a gargoyle, the only other living gargoyle in existence, which means we should have some things in common.

But the truth is, I’ve never felt further apart from anyone—which is beyond strange, considering I can actually hear him inside my head.

“Are you okay?” I ask, sitting down in the chair on the other side of the chess table.

“Worried. So worried,” he says out loud, and I’m startled to hear his voice. I mean, he spoke to me on the island, but I’m so used to hearing him in my head that it takes a moment to adjust.

I nod. “Yes, I know. I heard you while I was sleeping. And when I woke up.”

“Sorry.” He looks sheepish. “Must hurry.”

“Don’t apologize,” I tell him with a shake of my head. “But why do we need to hurry? What’s going on?”

“Out of time.”

I can’t tell if he’s talking about us, himself, or someone else. I really hope he’s saying Cyrus is out of time, but I doubt I’m that lucky. “Who’s out of time?”

He doesn’t answer, just leans forward in his chair to emphasize the urgency of his message. “Out of time.”

Which tells me exactly nothing that I didn’t know before. He keeps saying the *out of time* thing, and it’s beginning to freak me out—especially when I think about all the different things going on that could have us running out of time. Are we almost out of time to save the kids? Is Cyrus coming back for us? Is the Crown about to self-destruct on my hand?

“What is running out of time?” I ask, frustration evident in my voice. “What’s going to happen?”

But he doesn’t answer. Of course he doesn’t—he’s always been good at getting me all worked up over a warning but not providing any details to back up that warning. From the tunnels when I first got here to that weird-looking tree out on the Katmere grounds to the prison cell Hudson, Flint, and I were locked in with Remy and Calder, he’s given me a bunch of advice. He just never tells me what the advice is for or what I should do instead of whatever it is he’s advising against.

Which is helpful in some ways, I guess, but definitely not helpful in others.

Like now, when he holds the chess piece of the vampire queen out to me.

“You want to play chess?” I ask, ignoring the piece that I now realize bears a marked resemblance to Delilah. Thanks but no thanks. Been there, done that, so not interested in a repeat performance. Particularly since playing with the remaining vampire pieces means having to pick up the vampire king as well. And no way am I voluntarily going near Cyrus, even if it is just a marble likeness of him. “If so, I call dragons.”

The Beast shakes his head.

“You don’t want to play chess?”

“Out of time.” He jabs the air with the vampire queen chess piece.

“The vampire queen is out of time? That doesn’t exactly make me feel bad, you know?”

This time the gargoyle sighs, like he’s so disappointed that I don’t understand what he wants from me. And I feel bad, I do. But it’s not like his disjointed manner of communication makes things easy. Of course, who am I to talk? If I spent a thousand years chained up in a cave with paranormal creatures from all over the globe regularly trying to kill me, my grasp on language—and reality—would probably be pretty tenuous, too.

But knowing that only makes it harder for me to try to figure out his advice, not easier. Because if a thousand years in isolation has driven him mad, how can I trust what he’s trying to tell me anyway?

It’s my turn to sigh. This whole mess keeps turning into a bigger and bigger nightmare.

“Grace.”

He says my name with such urgency—and authority—that I automatically snap to attention. “Yes?”

“Careful. Be careful.”

*Tell me something I don't know.* "I know. I'm being careful. Believe me, we're all being careful as fuck of the Vampire Court. Cyrus—"

"No!" He stares at me with narrowed eyes, then slams the vampire queen down so hard, I expect the piece to shatter. But it doesn't. In fact, it doesn't so much as chip an edge.

Like that isn't even more ominous. All I need is Delilah to be as indestructible as Cyrus is turning out to be.

"The queen?" I ask, reaching for the piece. "Are you warning me about Delilah?"

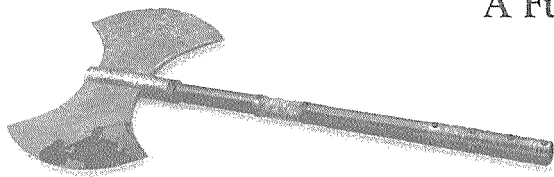
I expect him to let go of the piece now that he's made his point, but he holds on to the cool marble even as I wrap my hand around it. Which is how our fingers brush and how a strange electricity zings its way straight through me, causing me to instinctively reach for my platinum gargoyle string in a rush. Before I can grab it, though, a jolt of power zaps me so hard, it steals my breath.

At first, I think it's just a shock, just static electricity as two people touch. But I haven't been shocked since I turned into a gargoyle the first time by accident.

I go to pull my hand away with a nervous laugh and try to make a joke, but it's too late. He's turning back into stone, and a quick glance down at my body shows that I am, too, with both our now-stone hands still firmly holding the vampire queen.

## 8

## A Full-Court Mess



I know this feeling. It's like turning to stone, only not. When I become a gargoyle, there's a strange kind of tingling that starts in my feet. Fast, so fast that I barely feel it happening, the tingling moves up my legs and arms. It takes over my whole body, tiny pinpricks of electricity all over me, heightening my senses instead of dulling them, exacerbating the feel of my heart beating, lungs breathing, blood rushing through my body. Sharpening my mind so that it's like I see everything, feel everything, as time slows, as my reactions speed up.

This is most definitely not that.

This is just as fast, but I'm aware of every cell as the electricity moves up my body, crawling along every nerve ending like needles stabbing into my flesh instead of mere pinpricks. My feet, my legs, my hands, my chest, my shoulders, the pain is almost too much to bear. By the time it reaches my head, I open my mouth to scream in agony, but it's too late. My body is already solid stone, suffocating the scream in my chest under its heavy weight.

My senses are so overwhelmed—I'm so overwhelmed—that it takes a second for me to catch my breath and several more seconds for me to get my bearings. If you can call it that, considering I have absolutely no idea what just happened and if I'm even still *here*. As I look around, trying to answer at least one of those questions, I realize that I can barely see three feet in front of my face.

Everything else is encased in mist.

At first, I think I'm alone, and panic kicks in as a million different scenarios race through my brain. Like maybe this is all some terrible trap that Cyrus has laid for me with this man's help. Like maybe he wanted us to free the Unkillable Beast all along—just to get me here.

But as I turn around and see the older gargoyle in his human form several feet away, reason comes back to me. The Beast *hates* Cyrus—at least as much as

Hudson does. The vampire king kept him imprisoned in a cave for a thousand years. No way would he get in bed with him now that he's finally free. I don't believe it.

Moreover, I *won't* believe it.

It's that thought more than any other that has me taking several steps toward the gargoyle, who is currently crouching on the ground.

As I get closer, I realize he looks as shocked as I feel—maybe even more so. His eyes are wide, his mouth slightly open as he reaches down to touch the shiny stone floor beneath our feet.

"Is this real?" he whispers as he moves left and right, touching the floor all around him.

"I was about to ask you the same question," I tell him, watching as a smile takes over his worried face for what I'm pretty sure is the first time since I've met him.

It's an incredible smile, and it absolutely transforms him. It makes him look younger, handsomer, stronger, prouder.

It's an image that is reinforced when he finally stands up. No longer is he the worn down, broken, confused Unkillable Beast we've been dealing with ever since we first found his island. No, this man is something else entirely.

Something regal.

Something powerful.

He stands about six foot six, taller than Hudson and Jaxon and broader around the shoulders, too. His heavily muscled arms are enclosed in a tight black shirt, over which he is wearing a long gray-and-black tunic that goes down to mid-thigh. His legs are encased in black tights, his feet in black boots, and as he smooths a hand down the fine velvet fabric, I realize what I'm staring at.

This is the gargoyle in his heyday, before Cyrus tricked him into that cave and turned him into the Unkillable Beast.

And like a hit to the chest, I know who he is. Who he has to be. This handsome, noble man in thousand-year-old finery is none other than the gargoyle king.

The true ruler of the Gargoyle Court I laid claim to during that game of Ludares.

The true owner of the Crown currently emblazoned on my palm.

And suddenly, I don't have a clue what to say to him. Or if I should bow.

Thankfully, he doesn't seem to be suffering from the same problem. After he finishes inspecting himself—and straightening his tunic just the slightest

bit—he takes another look around. “Well done, Grace,” he says. “Well done.”

The words are heavily accented, but I’m not sure from where. It’s a familiar-sounding English accent—not British like Hudson, not Australian like some of my favorite actors, and definitely not American, but familiar all the same.

“I don’t think I can take any credit for this,” I tell him truthfully. “Considering I have no idea where we are or how we got here.”

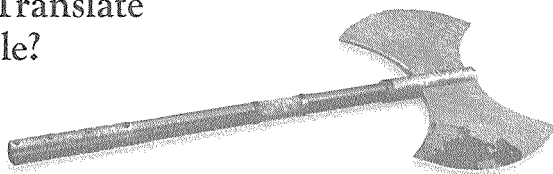
Somehow, his grin grows even wider. “Do you really not know where we are?”

I look around, trying to see beyond the mist, but nearly everything that’s more than a couple of feet away is shrouded in mystery. “I have absolutely no idea.”

“What a shame it’s come to this.” He shakes his head a little sadly, then waves an arm, and the fog clears, letting me finally see what the mist was hiding. “Welcome, my dear Grace, to the Gargoyle Court.”



## Does Google Translate Speak Gargoyle?



Holy shit.  
I mean, *holy shit*.

He has to be kidding, right? We can't actually be at the Gargoyle Court.

Except, as I look around at this opulent courtyard, I can't help but think that he's telling the truth. The floor is made of marble, as are the pillars on either side of a tall, intricately woven, gold-and-jeweled fence. And the courtyard is the front entrance to what looks like a very large, very ornate medieval castle.

Which makes sense, considering the gargoyle king has been imprisoned for more than a thousand years. According to Flint, the Dragon Court has changed and adapted through the years, currently in one of the most expensive skyscrapers in New York. With the king imprisoned and the rest of the gargoyles dead, the Gargoyle Court didn't have the chance to evolve at all.

We must be in a dream in his mind somehow, experiencing the majesty of this Court he remembers. Thinking of what the Gargoyle Court could be, should be now if not for Cyrus, makes my heart ache.

"It's beautiful," I tell him, looking up at a castle that is easily twice as big as Katmere, and so majestic my fingers itch to paint it.

We're standing in the courtyard in front of the main structure, but as I turn in a circle to take everything in, I realize there's a lot more behind me as well as in front of me. The castle is surrounded by a huge, real-life moat with a large wooden drawbridge. And around the whole property is a giant stone wall that has to be a good seventy-five feet tall—I assume to combat the fact that most paranormal creatures can jump pretty damn high.

The castle itself is incredibly imposing, built from stone, with huge, crenelated battlements at the top of the main structure and four large, round towers that stand at each corner.

There are more windows in all shapes and sizes than I expected based on

my very limited knowledge of medieval castles. But the stained glass of the windows is a lot more rudimentary in design than I'd have guessed. Of course, it's not like I have any idea when stained glass became a thing. Maybe this was as sophisticated as it got a thousand years ago.

The rest of the castle certainly seems to be top-of-the-line.

"This is your Court?" I ask, still spinning in a slow circle in an effort to take it all in. "You are the gargoyle king and built it?"

"I am, and I did. My name is Alistair, by the way," he says in that smooth and cultured voice that is so different from anything I have ever heard from him before. "But you're mistaken as to whose Court it is." He grins at me as he holds up my hand with the Crown tattoo. "This is your Court, my dear Grace, not mine. Not anymore."

My knees go weak at the thought. When I imagined building the Gargoyle Court with the money I got from the Wyvernhoard, I'd imagined something a little smaller, less intimidating. More...beachy. A place a born-and-raised San Diego girl could feel comfortable in.

I look up, up, up to the top of the castle. There's nothing comfortable about this place. Everything I've seen here screams opulence and pure intimidation.

"But you're the king," I tell him, doing my best to ignore the way the Crown is burning against my palm. "This belongs to you."

"I *was* the king." His smile is more rueful than sad. "You rule the Gargoyle Court now, which means this castle—this Court—is yours to do with as you will."

The thought makes my already aching stomach twist even more. This whole ruling thing is getting real, too real, even though we're the only two gargoyles left. If we actually manage to defeat Cyrus, I'm suddenly terrified that I really am going to have to take my place on the Circle.

"Is that why you brought me here?" I ask as I try to get my head around the magnitude of all this. "To show me what I rule?"

Alistair laughs. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Grace, but I didn't bring you here. *You* brought *me* here. And I am so glad you did. It's..." He pauses to look around as he runs his hand down the fine velvet of his tunic once more. "It's nice to be here again, even if it is just for a few stolen moments."

"I don't understand. What do you mean, I brought you here? I didn't even know this place existed—"

"And yet you got us here nonetheless. It's very impressive, my dear. Very, very impressive. Especially considering how young you are." He shakes his head, an awed look on his face. "You're so much more powerful than I imagined, and

I imagined quite a lot.”

I must look as confused as I feel, because Alistair waves a hand in front of us. “Let’s walk, shall we, and I’ll try to answer all your questions.”

“There are a lot of them,” I warn him as we begin to stroll across this giant, ancient courtyard like we’re having an afternoon tea party instead of waiting in the early morning for Cyrus and his army to try to destroy everyone and everything we care about. “Starting with, how can you talk here so easily? Usually when you speak to me, it’s obvious that it’s an effort.” He raises one imperious brow at that, and I quickly hold my hands up in apology. “No offense meant.”

“No offense taken,” he answers. But his face remains stern, his eyes narrowed.

And can I just say how truly bizarre the differences in him are? I mean, I get that he was locked up for a thousand years and that did really terrible things to every part of him. And I’m not saying he wasn’t scary as hell as the Unkillable Beast. He absolutely was. But there’s something about the gargoyle king, something about *this* Alistair, that is a million times more daunting.

We walk for several more yards in silence, the heels of Alistair’s boots clapping against the polished marble with each step we take. I’m just beginning to think he isn’t going to answer my question, despite what he promised, when he says, “Leading our people isn’t easy. It comes with many responsibilities—to the world and to our people. One of those responsibilities is being open to them, always.”

He sighs and takes a long, slow breath before continuing. “Gargoyles were created to be the perfect peacekeeper, to bring balance back to the world of humans and paranormals. One of those gifts to aid us, as I’m sure you’ve figured out by now, is that gargoyles can all speak telepathically to one another. It’s how we can coordinate attacks and better patrol areas.”

What he’s saying makes complete sense, based on the story the Crone told us, yet I can’t help my heart from speeding up, as I’m finally learning more about what it means to be a gargoyle—from a gargoyle.

He continues. “Everyone can communicate telepathically within a short distance. A unit can easily stay coordinated that way. There are a few lieutenants who can communicate over much larger distances, of course. And then there’s the royal line...” He turns to look me in the eyes as he explains. “The royal line can speak to everyone, regardless of distance. They’re our people, and we can always hear them when they need us. It’s both a gift and a burden.”

Okay, in theory, that sounds lovely. A king so connected to his subjects

that they can reach out to him anytime and have his attention in an instant. In practice, however, I can only imagine it's more troublesome being able to hear those thousands and thousands of voices every minute of every day, if the king chooses.

"Can you never silence the voices?" I ask.

He nods. "We can filter as we need. But being trapped in gargoyle form for a millennium, well, I've slowly lost that strength and control in the real world. Slowly lost the ability to quiet the voices, much less reply to them. Thousands of voices speaking simultaneously in my head at all times, begging me to help, to save them, to free them. Crying out in pain and wondering why I haven't come, why I haven't answered their pleas." His voice turns to gravel. "So many voices..."

It sounds horrible, beyond horrible really.

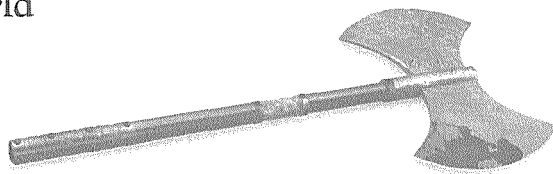
And then another thought comes to me. A thought so overwhelming, so tempting, it has my heart beating wildly in my chest.

Because there wouldn't be thousands of people preventing him from thinking clearly if we are the only two remaining gargoyles...

I'm about to ask him as much, but then he lifts a brow and says something that makes my heart drop to my toes even as it sends my brain spinning in a million different directions.

"Surely you know what that's like, granddaughter. You must be inundated with voices from the Gargoyle Army as well, yes?"

## Rock My World



There is so much to unpack in that statement that I don't even know where to start.

Granddaughter? Gargoyle Army? I should hear the voices, too? Of creatures everyone believes are dead? Just the thought makes me feel like I'm going to throw up.

I mean, what exactly am I supposed to say to any of this? And how am I supposed to chill my stomach out when it's been in free fall ever since he said the word "granddaughter"?

Which I guess tells me exactly where I need to start. I mean, having a Gargoyle Army talk to me at all hours—even having a Gargoyle Army at all—is a pretty big thing to have dropped on you out of nowhere. But for me, personally, it's nowhere near as big as the fifteen-thousand-pound elephant that the gargoyle king—that my grandfather?—just brought into the room.

"Granddaughter?" I ask, nearly choking on the word for a lot of different reasons. To begin with, I've never had grandparents—my own parents said mine died years before I was born.

And secondly, how can the gargoyle king—the *gargoyle king*—be my grandfather? He's been chained in a cave alone for a thousand years, and my parents were only in their forties when they died. The timing doesn't make sense.

Then again, nothing makes sense right now, including Alistair's insistence that I'm the one who brought us to the Gargoyle Court.

"Not my immediate granddaughter, of course. But you're definitely of my line. Several greats down that line, if I had my guess, but your power is unmistakable."

Okay, being his great-great-great-whatever-granddaughter makes a little more sense. But how does he know that we're related? It's not like I have his very aquiline nose or his gray-eyed coloring. The more I think about how commanding the gargoyle king is, how regal, versus how absolutely clueless I usually feel, my

skin itches beneath my wrinkled hoodie as adrenaline rushes in my veins.

We're strolling along the edges of the courtyard now, where there is a ring of dirt and rosebushes every few feet. They look dormant, but as we walk past the first, it springs to life the second my too-many-to-count-great-grandfather passes by. It's incredible to watch, and I can't help wondering if this is an extension of the earth powers I'm just beginning to understand.

Which reminds me... "What did you mean?" I ask as yet another rosebush comes alive—this one a bright, cheerful coral that makes me smile despite the seriousness of this whole situation. "About my power being unmistakable?"

"I've been mated to your grandmother for nearly two millennia. I would recognize her power anywhere, and you, my dear, definitely have it inside you." He winks. "Plus, you're a fighter. You've got my grit."

I'm not sure about that, considering my fights tend to choose me instead of the other way around. I don't run from them, but it's not like I look for them, either. It's just that there are a lot of people in this new world who seem to want me dead. And since I don't want to be dead...fighting is pretty much the only option open to me.

But now doesn't exactly feel like the time to debate my fighting instincts, not when my grandfather has dropped yet another bomb. "I have a grandmother, too?"

"Of course you have a grandmother! And she is one hell of a woman—definitely the bravest, stubbornest female I've ever met." He looks me over. "Up until now, that is."

He acts like he wants to say more, but instead he pauses, and his eyes go blank, like he's searching deep inside himself for something. As silence stretches between us, I can't help thinking about what he said when he gave me the Crown and the woman he spoke so adamantly about. Was it my grandmother all along? And if so, how can she be alive when Alistair and I are the last two gargoyles in existence?

I'm about to ask, but he chooses that moment to sigh in relief as his eyes come back into focus. "She's still alive. I knew she must be, but since you didn't know about her, I was afraid..." He shakes his head as if clearing it of thoughts he'd rather not talk about. "But she's fine and is definitely still kicking. You really should go meet her. Maybe you can take me with you. She's been angry with me for a millennium, but I know she's missed me, too. And I've missed her very, very much."

"She's alive?" I ask, excitement zipping through me despite my still-churning

stomach. "There's another gargoyle out there? I thought we were the only ones."

Now it's Alistair's turn to look incredulous. "First of all, your grandmother would bite you—or turn you into something very, very slimy—if she even imagined that you would mistake her for a gargoyle. She loves me, but she definitely has a little bit of a superiority complex about the stone thing."

He rolls his eyes with a laugh, and for a moment, he looks so boyish—so not the poor, tortured Beast we fought to free—that I can't help but laugh along with him.

But then he grows serious. "Your grandmother is my mate, the love of my life."

My heart breaks at what he doesn't say: that he's been separated from his mate for a thousand years. I think of Hudson, of how safe and happy and right it feels to be in his arms, and then I think about what it would feel like to be away from him. Not for a day or two but for what feels like an eternity.

It hurts, more than I could have imagined it would. It makes me ache for Alistair and for his mate, whoever she is.

And that's before he tries to blink away the tears in his eyes, looking like he hopes I won't notice. "Do you think you could bring her here to us? Just for a little while? I miss her so much."

"I—" My voice breaks, and I clear my throat, even as I try to figure out what to say. I would love to bring her here, if I knew where *here* was. Or where she was. Or how I even brought the two of us to this place that I've never seen before, that I never even imagined still existed.

"I would really like to do that," I finally settle on, because it's true. "Do you know where your mate is?"

"I don't know. I just assumed she would have found you—" He breaks off with a heavy sigh. "Well, that's a shame, then. I was really hoping to see her sooner rather than later. She quieted the voices in my head when no one and nothing else could. I was hoping she could do that now, so I could be of some help to you in planning a strategy for the coming battle."

The words are another punch to my already shaky gut. "She's the only way you can quiet the voices?" I ask.

"For now, yes," he answers gravely.

"Even though they're dead? They still speak to you?"

"Dead?" He looks half confused, half affronted.

"I mean gone." I change tacks quickly, as the last thing I want to do is offend him. "Even though they're gone?"

This time he just looks baffled. “The gargoyles aren’t gone, dear. They’re all around us, and they never stop talking.”

Now I’m the one who’s confused. “What do you mean, they’re all around us?”

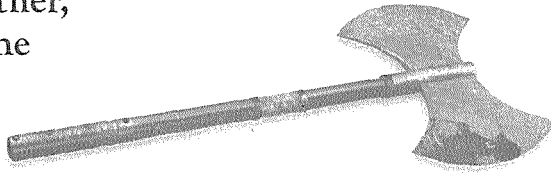
Maybe those years in isolation have done even more damage to his psyche than I thought.

“They’re all around us,” he repeats, waving an arm to the side, like he’s the barker at some paranormal carnival.

As he does, he reaches for the huge wooden doors at the front of the castle we’ve been walking toward and swings them open, revealing an even larger grass courtyard. Spread out around the courtyard are dozens upon dozens of gargoyles, and each one is carrying a massive sword and an even more massive shield.



## Light as a Feather, Hard as a Stone



This time, I'm the one whose mouth is wide open in astonishment, but I don't think anyone can blame me. For months now, I've thought I was the only gargoyle left, and now—right in front of me—are so many that they fill an entire courtyard that's almost the size of a football field.

"Are they—are they real?" I ask, barely able to get the words past my suddenly too-tight throat. It's overwhelming—in an entirely good way—to realize I'm not alone in the world. That there are more people out there who are just like me.

I love Hudson and Jaxon and Macy and Flint—not to mention the rest of my friends. I really do, and I know that I'll always have a place with them. That I'll always fit in with them. But that doesn't mean I haven't wished I could be like them sometimes, so sure of who and what they are in a world that continuously turns me upside down. Yes, they all have their own worries and problems, but at least they aren't also struggling with the core identity of who they are. Hudson is a vampire through and through. Everything about Flint screams dragon. And Macy is definitely a witch.

More importantly, they know what that *means*. What they can do, what they can take—what they can survive.

As for me...up until a few months ago, I would have said I know exactly who I am. And for the most part, I do. I'm Grace. I like art and old movies, history and Harry Styles, Dr Pepper and dancing for hours. Before my parents died, I planned on going to UC Santa Cruz and studying marine conservation. And now I live in Alaska—at least for a little while longer anyway. I don't know what is going to happen in the next ten minutes, let alone the next four years. And I'm a gargoyle.

Which is cool. It really is, for so many, many reasons. I love it. But as I stand here looking at a courtyard full of paranormals who are just like me on a fundamental level, I realize that there's a part of me that has been lonely through

all of this. A part of me that wants someone to compare notes with, someone to talk to about all the wild stuff going on inside me, someone who understands what it feels like to be a gargoyle.

And now, right in front of me, are a whole lot of people who *do* understand. Who *do* know our history and our powers. I don't know them yet. I may never know them, but realizing that they exist makes me feel a little less alone.

"They're real, my dear girl." Alistair grins down at me indulgently. "And this group is just a drop in the bucket to how many gargoyles are out there, an entire army just waiting for their chance to reclaim their honor. To reclaim their place in the world under the direction of their queen. Their general."

My stomach does a complicated series of backflips at his words. I'm getting used to being a gargoyle, and maybe even getting used to being the head of the Gargoyle Court, with a seat on the Circle. But that was when I thought there were no gargoyles left. Now, to find out that there are a lot of gargoyles in the world, and I'm supposed to be their queen—and even more shocking, *their general*—is more than I can wrap my head around. At least none of them have spotted us yet. I need time to process.

"Would you like to meet some of them?" Alistair asks me.

"I can meet them?" My heart rate ticks up another several notches. "I mean, I can talk to them?"

"Of course. You are the gargoyle queen, after all."

"But if I'm the queen," I say as I allow him to propel me through the ornately carved doors, "what does that make you?"

My words give him pause, and at first I think he isn't going to answer. But then he glances at me out of the corner of his eye and says, "A trusted adviser, I hope."

The massive doors close behind us with an ominous *thud*, and I can't help thinking that Alistair isn't the only one longing for his mate. It would be pretty nice to have Hudson here with me, watching my back as I enter into a situation I never even imagined, let alone prepared for.

Alistair takes several more steps into the space, and I follow him, my eyes jumping from one group of gargoyles to the next.

Though they are all armed and in their animate stone form, nobody has a weapon raised. Instead, they're all milling around the courtyard in groups of two, and sometimes three or four. Everyone is tall and muscular—much bigger than I am—but none of them is quite as large as Alistair. Of course, even in his regular old gargoyle, non-Unkillable Beast form, he stands head and shoulders

above most people.

There's only one other person in the room in human form—a tall, bulky man positioned at the front of the group. He's dressed like Alistair, in tights and a tunic, though his clothes are in shades of emerald green and gold instead of Alistair's black and gray. He's also the only one in the group not carrying a weapon.

Still, when he shouts, "Ready!" everyone else in the courtyard springs into action. They lower themselves into defensive crouches with their shields held high or go on the offensive, their gigantic swords raised to attack.

I wait for the sound of steel striking against steel, but several *long* seconds tick by before the man shouts, "Ionsaí!"

I have no idea what the word means, but it's obviously the command the other gargoyles are waiting for. His shout is still ringing all around us when swords begin to arc through the air.

I watch in awe as the gargoyles spar, swords meeting other swords or shields as they jump, spin, even somersault in midair. These gargoyles are huge, heavy, and yet they move like they are made of feathers rather than stone.

A tall, sturdy girl shouts something in a language I don't understand as she slams her sword down on her opponent with all her might. He meets her with the edge of his shield, but she's pivoting even as the weapons connect, doing a jump-spin combination that ends when she brings her sword around in a sweeping arc, the broad side of it hitting her opponent right between the shoulder blades.

He goes flying ass over teakettle and ends up sprawled out on the ground, shield raised defensively as she swings her sword back around one more time.

At the last minute, she grins and tucks her sword back into the scabbard at her waist before reaching a hand down to help him up. He rolls his eyes and says something in that language I don't understand that makes her throw back her head and laugh. Seconds later, they both transform into human forms.

She's Black, with rows of gorgeous braids, and he has short dark hair and golden-brown skin.

"Still think I fight like a girl?" she taunts.

"Damn straight," he answers with what sounds like an Indian accent. "I just wish I did, too." He moves his sword in a complicated pattern, then breaks off mid-swing. "Hey, show me how you did that wrist thing earlier?"

"Of course."

As she moves to show him, I glance at another group. This one is made up of all male gargoyles, and I'm not exaggerating when I say they are massive—

like *two football players each* massive—with swords and shields built to match.

Right now, they're fighting two-on-one, with the biggest of the three playing defense against the others. And he is still kicking both their butts.

Alistair and I stand to the side and watch as the training continues. The guy in green, who has been in human form all along, walks from group to group, offering advice and critiques: "watch your back," "turn your wrist when you make that move," "don't drop your shoulder," "pick your foot up and pivot on the ball of it." The comments go on and on, as nothing seems to escape his eagle eye.

Every gargoyle he talks to hangs on his every word, and I can see them trying to implement his suggestions as soon as he walks away. It's fascinating.

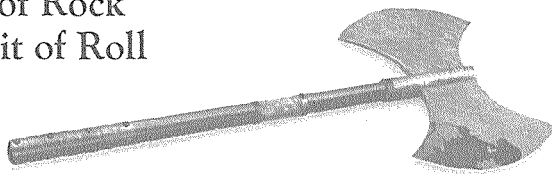
"Who is that?" I finally ask Alistair once the guy in emerald green begins his third circle of the courtyard.

"That's Chastain. He's been my lieutenant general for as far back as I can remember." Alistair pauses, a contemplative look on his face as he watches his old friend. "And now I guess he's yours. Would you like to meet him?"

Wow. This is getting real, fast. I blow out a long breath and say the only thing I can. "Yes, of course. I'd love to."

After all, a queen really does need to know who she can trust. Right?

## A Whole Lot of Rock and a Little Bit of Roll



“Chastain!” Alistair calls, raising a hand to beckon the other man over. The commander offers a few more quick instructions to a group, this time in that language I don’t understand, then turns to Alistair—and his eyes widen in shock.

“What language are they speaking?” I ask as we wait for Chastain to make his way over to us.

Alistair raises his brows. “English?”

I laugh. “I know they’re speaking English. But they’re also speaking something else. What is it?”

“Oh, that’s Gaelic, child. You don’t recognize it?”

“Gaelic?” I look around in wonder. Even as I repeat the word, Alistair’s familiar-sounding accent clicks into place. No wonder he sounds so much like Niall Horan. He’s Irish. “Are we in *Ireland*?”

“Yes,” Alistair answers, his gaze holding Chastain’s as the other man’s long strides eat up the space between them. “County Cork, to be precise.”

“Cork?” I call up my very rudimentary understanding of Irish geography. “That’s near the sea, isn’t it?”

“You can’t hear it?” Alistair asks. “We’re right on the edge of it.”

At first, I’m not sure what he’s talking about—I can’t hear anything—but before I can say that, a couple of new gargoyles walk into the courtyard. And the second they open the heavy wooden doors, I know exactly what he’s talking about. I do hear it—the sound of water hitting against rock over and over again.

We’re on the ocean! Or, if not the ocean, then at least the edge of a sea. It’s the closest I’ve come to a beach in months, and it takes every ounce of energy I have not to race out of the castle and run for the water. It’s been so long, and now that it’s right here, close enough to stand on—close enough to touch—it’s all I can think about.

Except just then, Chastain reaches us. I watch as the two men give each other a very masculine, *pat on the back* kind of hug before Chastain says, “My king, I thought—we all thought—the worst may have happened to you. It’s been too long, but we never lost hope.”

My eyes widen as I realize everyone must not have known what happened to Alistair, that he’s been hunted for a thousand years and chained up on a deserted island, unable to return to his people. I can’t even imagine what it must feel like to see him now, know that he is alive and returned, wonder what kept him away.

The smile dims in Alistair’s eyes. “I am so sorry I was gone for so long. Especially after what my mate did to you all. Just know there was no other way. I see that now. Everything that has happened, happened for a reason. And now there is much to do to prepare for what is to come, my friend.”

“We are ready, my king. We have not missed a day of training since...”

A look passes between the two men that is heavy with meaning. “Yes, well, we have this young lady to thank for my rescue and return.” Alistair turns to me. “Chastain, this is my great-great-great—” He laughs. “You know what? I’m just going to forget how many greats there are between us and call her my granddaughter. This is my granddaughter, Grace, and now the queen of the Gargoyle Court. Grace, this is Chastain, my oldest and dearest friend. For centuries, he was my second-in-command of the greatest army to ever walk the earth. You should feel free to call on him anytime you have questions about your army.”

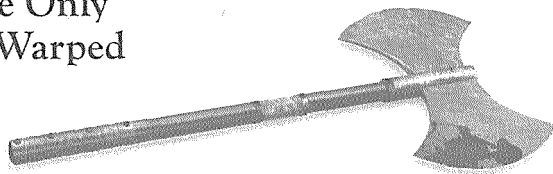
Chastain’s eyes widen as Alistair speaks, though I don’t know if it’s because he’s surprised I’m Alistair’s granddaughter or if it’s because he’s as shocked to find out there’s a new ruler of the Gargoyle Court as I am to find out there are actually gargoyles to rule.

Either way, he covers his surprise by bending his head and dropping into a deep bow.

As one, the entire courtyard of gargoyles stops training and turns to Alistair and me—and drops to their knees in matching bows.

And that doesn’t feel weird at all.

## Time's Not the Only Thing That's Warped



“It is an honor to meet you, my queen.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, too?” It comes out sounding like a question, but that has more to do with me feeling awkward about being called *queen* than it does not being honored to meet him.

He holds out a hand to me even as he continues to bow. Mystified, I go to take his hand, but Alistair stops me with a shake of his head.

I give him a *what do I do?* look, and he smiles as he holds up his own hand for me to see.

For the first time, I notice that he is wearing an ornate gold ring set with a square-cut emerald the size of a large die. It’s beautiful—a deep, clear green that looks very, very expensive—and I watch in horror as he slips it off his finger and holds it out to me.

“What—” My voice cracks for the second time in the last hour as I ask a question whose answer I am very much afraid of. “What are you doing with that?”

He shoots me a reproving look, one that tells me I’m right to be afraid, just before he takes my right hand and slides it onto my ring finger.

I expect the ring to be too big—Alistair’s hands are much bigger than mine—and instinctively clutch my fingers into a fist to keep it from falling off. But it turns out that, somehow, the ring fits perfectly. It’s heavy as fuck and big enough to take an eye out, but it definitely fits.

Which causes my already shaky stomach to pitch and roll as violently as the waves crashing against the cliffs below us. I may not have had a formal coronation yet, but something tells me this is more than just symbolic—and that there’s no going back now.

*This can’t be happening. I’m not ready for this to be happening. This can’t be happening.* The phrases leapfrog through my brain over and over as Chastain takes my newly beringed hand and kisses the ring. My ring.

I don't think anything in my life has ever terrified me as much as this moment. Not being on the Ludares field alone, not being locked in that horrible prison, not even doing battle on the Unkillable Beast's island. Because this whole queen thing...it's a lot.

It was a lot when it was just me. Now that I find out I'm supposed to be in charge of all these gargoyles, being responsible for keeping them safe when I can barely keep *myself* safe, is nearly unfathomable.

And yet the ring is on my finger, which means I have to fathom it.

Finally—*finally*—Chastain lets go of my hand and rises from his bow.

He appears to be waiting for me to say something, but I have no idea what the custom is. I settle for, "Thank you?" which makes Alistair laugh and Chastain give me a slightly bewildered look.

I cast around for something else to say, but before anything comes to me, Chastain glances at Alistair and says, "So, old man. Shall we show her how it's done?"

At first, Alistair looks like he's going to refuse the request, whatever it's for, but then he grins wider than I've ever seen and says, "By all means, *older* man."

From the space of one quick breath to the next, swords and shields appear in their hands. I barely have time to process what's happening, let alone duck out of the way, before Chastain strikes the first powerful blow.

Alistair brings his shield up to block the attack, then somersaults—actually *somersaults*—through the air, shifting instantly into his gargoyle form, to land on his feet behind Chastain. This time, it's his sword that arcs through the air.

Chastain dodges at the last second and shifts just as quickly, kicking out with his left stone foot even as he whirls around. And then it's on, the two of them striking steel upon steel over and over again. Both are determined to win, and both are excellent swordsmen, which means neither can quite get the jump on the other. And "jump" is definitely the right word as they roll, tuck, jump, fly, all with the hopes of catching the other by surprise.

It doesn't take long before a crowd of the other gargoyles gathers around us, swords at their hips as they cheer on Chastain and Alistair. I'm surrounded by gargoyles two times bigger than I am, all of whom are laughing and whistling and placing bets on who will win.

I end up standing next to the kick-ass girl I watched win her match earlier, and she is grinning ear to ear as she says, "They're fantastic, aren't they?"

It takes me a moment to realize she's speaking to me. "Yeah, they are." My eyes go big as Alistair delivers a blow with his sword that has Chastain flying



backward out of the impromptu practice circle the two created. He's moving so fast that I'm certain he's going to take out a gargoyle or three, and I brace myself for the impending crash.

They manage to scramble out of the way at the last second, and he ends up landing several yards back, at the base of the gold fence. For a second, he looks confused, and then another emotion flits across his face—annoyance or embarrassment, I can't quite tell. But then he's springing into action again, firing himself into the air fast and hard, like a bullet from a gun, before crashing back to earth on top of Alistair.

I expect Alistair to spin aside, but he braces himself instead and absorbs the impact, right before he uses Chastain's momentum against him and sends him flying in the other direction. This time, Chastain hits the fence hard enough to leave a dent in it and knock the air out of his lungs, which has everyone in the crowd chanting Alistair's name.

Apparently, that last takedown makes him the winner.

Chastain looks like he wants to object, like he wants to get up and knock Alistair into next week. But as the chanting gets louder and louder, Alistair takes a bow. The other gargoyles rush toward him, and one grabs his arm and lifts it in the air in the manner of champions everywhere.

Chastain, in the meantime, gets up slowly, brushes himself off, and waits for the crowd around Alistair to die down a little before walking over to congratulate him.

He's got a wide smile on his face, but there's something in his eyes that makes me nervous, even before he turns to me with an arched brow and asks, "So, do you want to try it?"

"Try what?" I ask, baffled.

Another gargoyle hurries up to us, a sword and a shield in his hands. "Here." He extends them out to me. "Why don't you try these on for size?"

Everything inside me recoils at the thought of picking up that sword and shield. Because if I do, it means I'm planning on using them to hurt—maybe even to kill—someone. Or be killed. "I'm not..." I trail off as I try to figure out how to explain my hesitation to a general who has obviously seen many battles.

Chastain is clearly interested in an explanation, because he asks, "Not what?"

"I don't—" I break off a second time, still not sure what I want to say here. Not sure what there is to say, except, "I'm not that kind of queen."

"And what kind is that exactly?" Chastain asks. His voice is mild, but he doesn't look impressed. In fact, for a second, I would swear he looks flat-out disgusted.

Still, the expression disappears as fast as it came—as do the sword and shield being held out to me when the young man pulls them back and scurries away.

As though the question were rhetorical, Chastain turns away and joins the crowd of gargoyles around Alistair. I wait patiently for their enthusiasm to wane, not sure what I'm supposed to be saying or doing besides lurking on the sidelines.

Chastain puts up with the chaotic well wishes for a few minutes before ordering the other gargoyles back to training. I watch as the men and women do as instructed, pulling out their swords and shields and diving in for another set of mock battles.

The tall girl with the braids is back in action, knocking her partner onto his butt in less than thirty seconds.

"Keep that up and I won't be able to walk tonight, let alone take over your watch," he warns her as he climbs back to his feet.

"Hey, it's not my fault you show me what you're going to do a good three seconds before you do it," she answers with a shrug.

"I do not!" he squawks indignantly.

"Oh yeah?" She lifts her sword back into position. "Then why do I keep knocking you down?"

He says something else, but I don't catch it because, all of a sudden, Alistair half shouts, "That isn't what we talked about!" to Chastain.

Chastain tries to say something else, but Alistair walks away from him mid-explanation.

The gargoyle king looks disgruntled and more than a little upset as he makes his way toward me. "Come on, Grace. We need to get going."

"Is everything okay?" I ask, even as I follow him back out through the courtyard.

"It'll be fine once—" He cuts himself off with a sigh. "It's fine."

"Are you sure?" I ask as we walk outside the castle gate to the land beyond. For the first time, I can see the sea down below. It's wild and wind-tossed, and as it smashes against the bottom of the cliffs, I feel a longing deep inside me—a homesickness for California, for the beach, *for my parents*—that I haven't let myself feel in a long, long time.

It's so strong that it makes my hands shake and my stomach hurt. I do my best to breathe through the pain...and to blink away the tears that come out of nowhere. Over the last few months, I've learned that grief is a strange and awful thing. You never know when it's going to catch up with you or how hard it will hit. Just that it will.

"Do you hear them yet?" Alistair asks.

I'm confused at first, thinking he means my parents. "Hear who?"

"The gargoyles. I hoped that being here, in the Court, might help you find them."

"Oh." I shove the grief down and do my best to listen deep inside my mind, but I don't hear anything except my own thoughts. "I'm sorry, but I don't."

He looks so disappointed that I can't help feeling guilty, which just gives me one more emotion that I don't know how to deal with roiling around inside me.

But before I can think of a way to apologize for what he clearly thinks is a failing on my part, Alistair continues. "No matter, dear girl. I'm sure you'll figure things out once you go see your grandmother." He grabs my hand, looks deep into my eyes. "There is much to do to prepare and very little time. You must let your grandmother help you. Cyrus will stop at nothing to kill you, Grace. You're the key to everything. Promise me you'll go see her."

He drops my hand before I can tell him that I have no idea who my grandmother is. And then it feels like we're falling, falling, falling, even though my feet never leave the ground.

Moments later, I'm back at Katmere, the chess piece in my hand and Alistair sitting across from me. But gone is the gargoyle king, and in his place is the very confused, very upset Unkillable Beast.

"No time," he grinds out as he climbs to his feet. "I must find mate."

And then he rushes to the entrance, throws open the door of the school, and flies away.

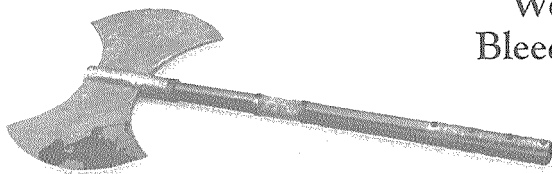
I gape after him. Well, *that* wasn't what I expected. Not him flying off and certainly nothing before that. Maybe I'm still asleep. Or maybe this was all some kind of bizarre hallucination on my part. I mean, it makes more sense than the idea that I somehow transported the Unkillable Beast—scratch that, *Alistair*, the former *gargoyle king*—and myself to the Gargoyle Court first thing in the morning.

At least until I look down and realize I'm still wearing the green-and-gold ring.

I stare at the empty seat in front of me, at the abandoned chess pieces, and my stomach twists. There are others like me, other gargoyles. But now?

Now I feel exactly like I did when I was told I'm the last gargoyle—all alone.

## 14

We Have to Stop  
Bleeding This Way

I may be alone, but there's still a lot to do, so I grab my bag from the floor and head back to Hudson's room. If he woke up while I was gone and couldn't find me, he's probably freaking out. And, more than likely, has all the others freaking out, too.

Not that I'd blame him. If he—or any of the others—disappeared right now, in the middle of this current mess, I'd be the first one turning over every rock in the place to find them. These are dangerous days we're living through, and I really do feel bad about getting lost like that in the Gargoyle Court.

Determined to calm Hudson down if he's currently scouring Katmere to find me, I pull out my cell to text him that I'm okay...only to realize that Alistair and I were only gone for about five minutes. Which doesn't make sense when I think about all the things we saw at the Gargoyle Court. I mean, Alistair's fight with Chastain alone took way longer than five minutes. And yet, according to my home screen, it's only been eight minutes since I snuck out of Macy's and my room.

Weird.

Again, I glance down at my finger. And again, the giant emerald winks up at me in the light cast by the black dragon sconces on the walls all around me.

So. Freaking. Weird.

I'm about to text Hudson anyway—better safe than sorry—but my phone goes off with a series of texts. Expecting it to be Hudson asking if everything is okay, I'm a little startled to find the texts are from Jaxon on our group chat, letting all of us know that Luca's parents have arrived hours ahead of schedule, and I feel short of breath.

Once again, it hits me that this is really happening, that this newest nightmare is one we can't wake up from, no matter how much we might wish it so.

I may not know exactly what Luca's parents are going through, but I know something of it, and it makes me sick. Makes me ache that after everything that's

happened in the last seven months, it feels like I'm right back where I started. Where all of this started.

Still, this isn't about me. It's about them, about Luca. And standing here on the verge of a panic attack isn't going to help any of them. I need to get my shit together and go out there—for Luca, for Jaxon, for *Flint*.

With that thought in mind, I head toward Katmere's main entrance and arrive just as a man and a woman walk through the door, their faces carefully blank but their eyes alive with pain and disbelief.

Jaxon is already in the foyer, as are Mekhi, Byron, Rafael, and Liam. Not that that surprises me—the Order has always had a kind of preternatural ability to know where the others are at all times and when they are needed.

One thing that does surprise me, though, is how steady Jaxon looks as he steps forward to greet Luca's parents. For a guy who nearly died less than twelve hours ago, he looks pretty damn solid—even taking into account the ability to heal quickly that most paranormals have.

The circles under his eyes that seemed to have grown worse every time I saw him for weeks are suddenly absent. His skin has gone from the sickly gray it was when he was losing his soul to a warm color that makes him look more vibrant. And even his body, which started to go from lean to gaunt, has begun to fill back out in the last twenty-four hours.

As he holds a hand out to first Luca's father and then his mother, a small spurt of relief cuts through the sadness and sickness inside me because, for the first time in what feels like a very long time, it looks like Jaxon might actually be okay. And that means everything to me.

"I'm so sorry," Jaxon tells them. "I failed to protect him—"

"We *all* failed," Mekhi interrupts, sorrow shining out of his dark-brown eyes. "He was our brother, and we couldn't save him. From the depths of my soul, I am sorry."

Each member of the Order steps forward and individually echoes the sentiment. Luca's parents respond to each apology with a nod, and though his mother has thin trails of tears running down her cheeks, she shows no other emotion—and neither does Luca's father. I don't know if that's a vampire thing or if it's just them, but the tight stranglehold they have on their emotions makes everything about this a little better...and a little worse.

They don't say anything else to accept the Order's apologies, but they don't scream at them, either. Instead, they simply stare at the five vampires with sad but assessing eyes. I don't know what they're looking for, and I definitely don't

know if they've found it. All I know is that their silence is making me very, very nervous, and it's making all of Hudson's concerns about them from earlier flood back into my mind.

Hudson arrives just as Liam finishes making his apology, and I feel him before I see him. The air in the room changes, and I turn toward him a second before he wraps an arm around my waist. "You okay?" he murmurs, his eyes cataloging my change in wardrobe as well as the backpack draped over my shoulder.

"As okay as I can be," I answer, sinking into his body as I turn back to Luca's parents.

"Where is he?" Luca's father finally asks, and I realize it's the first time he's spoken since he arrived. He's a tall man and lean like his son was. It's easy to see where Luca got his looks from, even though his father appears exhausted, his eyes sunken and skin drawn too tight over his cheekbones.

"We put him in one of the study halls," Jaxon answers, turning to lead the way down the hall.

"A study hall?" his mother echoes, a quiet horror in her voice.

And I get it, I do. Taken at face value, it doesn't sound like the most respectful place to put him.

But look around. Katmere is a disaster, and Jaxon's choices were obviously limited. Plus, this is a school, not a government building. It's not like there were many choices of what to do with a body even when Katmere was in good shape. Especially since the entire staff, minus Marise, has been kidnapped. Or worse.

Jaxon knows all this, but he doesn't defend his choice, even as his shoulders slump at their words. In my mind, it's just more proof that he really is a class act.

Eventually, Luca's parents move to follow Jaxon, which frees the rest of us to do the same. First the Order, then Hudson and me. We walk in solemn silence until we're joined by Eden and Macy about halfway down the hallway.

Eden whispers, "Where's Flint?" from behind us.

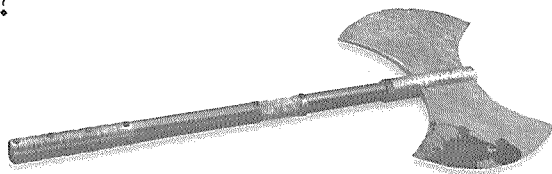
"I don't know. Do you think he's sleeping?" Macy asks.

"I don't think oversleeping is his problem," Hudson answers grimly. "More likely he can't get down here. I'll go see if I can—"

He breaks off suddenly as Flint, in dragon form, comes flying straight down the hallway, his crutches clutched in his front talons and his wings tucked in tight so as not to hit the walls around us. It's such an unexpected sight that all of us freeze.

Except Luca's mother, who gives a startled scream as he races over our heads, then flips a quick U-turn and lands right behind us.

Et Tu, Marise?



Flint shimmers for a moment before his dragon form disappears in a shower of beautifully colored sparks. Seconds later, he's standing in front of us in human form.

Though *standing* might be a bit of a stretch, considering he's wobbling a little as he balances on his one good foot while also trying to squat to get his crutches. He mutters a string of curses under his breath, and I move to him, determined to keep him from falling on his face in the middle of what is already a terrible time for him.

Jaxon beats me, though, scooping up Flint's crutches in one hand while he uses the other to steady him.

Flint ducks his head as he takes the crutches, but not before it becomes obvious that his cheeks are burning with embarrassment. I want to go to him, to tell him it's okay, but every single thing about him is screaming for us to leave him alone. So I do, as do the others.

Eventually, he gets himself situated on the crutches and walks forward, toward Luca's parents. We scramble out of the way—anything to make it easier for him—but once he locks eyes on Luca's mother, I don't think he even notices us anymore.

She seems to feel the same way, as she stares back just as intently. But her focus isn't on Flint's eyes. It's on Flint's mangled leg.

The look on his face is terrible, heartbreaking, as he negotiates his way down the hall to stop in front of her. Once there, he bows his head, much the same way that Jaxon did.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. "I'm so sorry we couldn't save him."

At first, I don't think she's going to say anything to him, but eventually she puts her hand on the back of his lowered head and whispers, "As are we."

A world of meaning—and accusation—hangs in those words, and I see it hit



Flint and Jaxon and the others, an avalanche of grief and pain that they don't even try to dodge. Which isn't fair to them—at all. They fought hard against Cyrus, risked life and limb to keep him from getting the Crown.

Yes, Luca died, and yes, it is horrible and tragic and senseless. But that doesn't make it Flint's fault. It doesn't make it any of our faults when we were right there with him, doing our best to keep one another safe. After all, where exactly were Luca's parents during the battle that killed their son?

A glance at Hudson tells me he's thinking the same thing I am. That he's likely been thinking it all along. Either way, he's in full defensive mode right now—hands loose by his sides, weight forward on the balls of his feet, eyes laser focused on Luca's parents, waiting for them to make a wrong move.

I really hope they don't.

Jaxon clears his throat, and Luca's parents reluctantly pull their attention away from Flint and back to him. He doesn't say anything, though. Just turns and continues to lead the way down the hall to the only study room on the first floor.

When we finally reach it, he takes a moment, as if he's bracing himself for what's within...or for whatever is going to happen next. Then he pushes the door open and steps back so that Luca's parents can go inside first.

Luca's mother gasps as she looks through the open doorway, and for a second, I think she's about to go down. But Luca's dad grabs on to her, wrapping an arm around her for support. Then the two of them make their way through the doorway into the room that holds Luca's remains while the rest of us follow quietly behind.

I brace myself, expecting it to be just like those moments when I had to identify my parents' bodies.

But it turns out there's nothing cold or sterile about the study room. Sometime while I was with Hudson—or Alistair—the Order has transformed it into a proper place of mourning.

Luca is laid out on a table in the center of the room, a sheet draped over him so that only his face is exposed. All around him burn hundreds of black candles—they must have raided the witches' tower to get this many—and beyond the candles are container after container of Alaskan wildflowers.

This time it's Luca's father who gasps as he stifles a sob. Luca's mother simply sinks to her knees beside her son's body.

"We'll give you a few minutes," Jaxon says into the agonized silence while the rest of us nod like puppets—then he backs toward the door.

"Thank you," his mother chokes out.



“Yes,” his father echoes. “Thank you for taking care of our son.”

“Luca was our brother,” Byron tells him, voice aching. “There’s nothing we wouldn’t have done for him.”

“We can see that.” Luca’s father clears his throat. “He always swore—”

He breaks off as Marise sweeps into the room in full dress robes. She’s still a little pale, but other than that, she looks much better than she did earlier. “Vivian, Miles. I’m so sorry that we’re meeting under these circumstances. We all loved Luca here at Katmere, and his death weighs heavy on us all.”

Luca’s parents don’t turn from their son, so Marise pivots to the rest of us, her striking face filled with compassion as she whispers, “I’ve made health draughts for you. They’re in the main common room, along with several bottles of blood. Drink them now and I’ll make more later. We don’t know what’s coming, and you need them to regain your strength.”

We definitely need all the help we can get, so I nod as Flint murmurs, “Yes, Marise,” and we turn to shuffle out of the room.

But just then, Luca’s father whirls around. His voice rings through the room as he orders, “Don’t!”

Marise reaches for him. “What’s wrong, Mi—”

She never gets to finish her sentence, because Vivian chooses that moment to spring up from the ground...and rip Marise’s throat out with her teeth.

Macy screams as Luca’s mom drops Marise, who is gurgling and gasping for breath with only half a throat, to the ground and steps back so Miles can drive a dagger right through the nurse practitioner’s heart.

“You need to go!” Miles warns as Vivian grabs on to Luca’s lifeless hand. “Marise alerted Cyrus that you had returned, and he’s coming for you. We were to be the distraction.”

It takes a second for his words to register for any of us. I know I’m too busy staring at Marise’s lifeless body, too busy trying to figure out what just happened, to internalize his warning.

I mean, Marise helped me so many times since I’ve been at Katmere. She saved my life when a broken window nearly killed me. She helped me begin to accept the idea that I’m a gargoyle, took care of me after the fight with Lia.

How could she be on Cyrus’s side? It doesn’t make sense.

Apparently, I’m not the only one with doubts, because Eden demands, “You think we’re just going to believe you? You killed her!”

“It makes no difference to me if you believe us or not,” Vivian snaps. “But it’s obvious you took care of my son the best you could. It seems only right that

we do our best to look after those he called friends, as he would be doing if he still could.”

“By killing Marise?” Macy asks, tears shining on her cheeks.

“Yes, and by warning you to get out before it’s too late,” Miles answers.

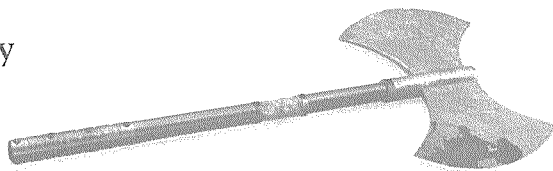
“Marise is no friend to you,” Vivian snarls. “Didn’t you ever wonder why she was the only one left here alive? Because she has always been loyal to Cyrus.” She looks down at Luca. “As have we, until now.”

“You have to go,” Miles repeats urgently. “Cyrus wants Grace, and he’ll stop at nothing to get her.”

With that, he leans forward to wrap one arm around Vivian and one arm around his son. Seconds later, all three of them vanish, fading in a blink out of the room to the portal outside they’d arrived through and leaving the rest of us standing over Marise’s body.

As her blood pools around her limp form, I can’t help the shiver that races along my spine at how violent and unforgiving this world is—and that it’s coming for me next.

## Every Wolf Has Their Day



“**W**hat do we do now?” Mekhi asks into the deafening silence that follows their departure.

Hudson is already at the window, scanning the early-morning horizon. “I don’t see anything, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t out there.”

“Oh, they’re out there,” comments a lightly accented voice from the doorway behind us. “And pretty soon, they’ll be in here.”

I whirl around so fast, I nearly trip over Jaxon, who has positioned himself in front of me even as Hudson fades to the door.

“Who are you?” Hudson demands of a young boy, probably fifteen or sixteen years old, with deep brown eyes and brown skin. His hair is black and just long enough that it brushes against his shoulders. At only a couple of inches taller than me, I’m oddly happy he’s not another giant of a paranormal for me to crane my neck to look at. He’s also super skinny, something that his too-big science T-shirt makes painfully obvious. If it wasn’t such a terrible day, I’d laugh at the slogan on it, though.

*You matter, unless you multiply yourself by the speed of light. Then you energy.*

I’m also pretty sure that he’s a wolf.

It’s that realization that has me crossing the room at a run so that I can back Hudson up—as does everyone else in the room.

The boy doesn’t even flinch. He skims his eyes over each of us, as if trying to decide who the biggest threat is. He must decide it’s Hudson, because he’s the one he’s looking at when he answers, “My name is Dawud. I’m from the Den of the Desert Sun in Syria.”

So I was right. He’s a wolf. “What are you doing here?” I ask, Luca’s parents’ warning fresh in my mind.

“I’m here because I didn’t think the Court vamps had it in them to betray

Cyrus,” he answers. “And to deliver the same warning they did. Wolves from all over the world are descending on Katmere to capture you—including the best soldiers in my den. I ran ahead to warn you, but they should be here soon, en masse.”

“You *ran ahead*?” Eden asks skeptically.

“I’m fast. And motivated.” Dawud picks something up off a table and examines it, then stuffs it into his pocket. “As you should be, unless you all want to die—or get captured. They really will be here soon. My guess is five minutes, ten if you’re lucky.”

He makes getting captured sound like the worse option of the two, and frankly, I don’t blame him. The idea of being at Cyrus’s mercy—of Hudson and Jaxon being at his mercy—has my heart stumbling in my chest.

“Why should we trust this guy if his alpha is in league with Cyrus?” Flint demands. “Maybe he’s here as a decoy.”

“They, actually,” Dawud clarifies. “And the vampire already admitted they were supposed to be the distraction. I’m here for the most obvious reason of them all. I need you.”

I have a hard time believing that.

“Need us for what?” I ask even as I consider reaching for my platinum string. Every nerve I have is on red alert, and if I need to fight, I want to be in gargoyles form to do it.

“My younger brother’s name is Amir. He’s a freshman at Katmere, and he was taken with the others. I have to get him out.”

“I know Amir!” Macy exclaims. “He’s a Padres fan, and we bonded one day over his vintage Tony Gwynn jersey.” Her shoulders sag. “My dad has one just like it.”

“That’s Amir.” Dawud’s throat works convulsively. “Our parents were killed two years ago, and I’ve been in charge of him ever since. I sent him to school expecting it to be the safest place for him, but... You’re the only chance I have to save him, and that won’t happen if I let Cyrus kill or capture you.”

Their voice rings with truth, and I can’t help believing them. A glance around shows me my friends believe them, too. God help us all.

“We’ve got ten minutes?” Jaxon asks, and I can practically see the wheels turning in his head.

“At the most.”

“So what do we do?” Eden asks.

“What do you think we do?” Byron growls. “We get the fuck out of here.”

Hudson wraps an arm around me. “Come on. Let’s fade to your room and pack what you need.”

“I already packed a bag to bring to your room. It’s got everything.”

“Well then, the rest of you pack a bag,” Hudson tells us as we walk back toward the foyer. “Grace and I will stand watch until you’re ready to go. But hurry, will you? Something tells me Cyrus won’t be waiting much longer.”

“Five min—” Flint starts, but he breaks off mid-word as a growl echoes from the staircase above us.

My blood turns to ice at the sound, and I look up in time to see a pack of fifty or so wolves—teeth bared and claws out—leap over the banisters at the exact same moment. Even worse, most of them seem to be heading straight for me.

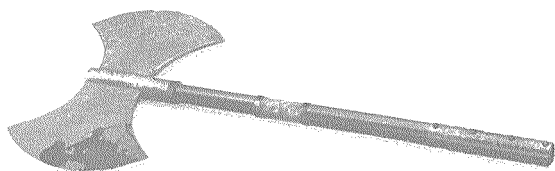
Hudson and Jaxon both lunge in front of me at the same moment. But then more growls sound from the front door behind us, and we’re surrounded. There’s no way we can fight them all, from every direction.

One minute they’re thirty feet away, and the next they’re only a breath from me. The shock of it has me frozen before I can reach for my platinum string.

I recover quickly, but before I can shift, just like that, they’re gone. Snarling for my blood one minute—nothing but dust the next.

My stomach twists, and this time, it’s not from mere nerves. Because I know what just happened and, even worse, exactly what it cost him.

## 17



Not All Dogs  
Go to Heaven

Hudson staggers back, nearly falls on his ass, but catches himself with a hand on the wall, his body doubled over.

“Dude, what the hell just happened?” Liam demands, spinning in a circle as if expecting the wolves to jump out at us at any moment.

“I don’t know,” Eden answers as she turns to Dawud. “Did you—”

“I didn’t do anything,” the wolf answers, hands up. “I didn’t think they’d get here this fast.”

Hudson bends over farther, as though even leaning on the wall is too much effort for him, and instead braces his hands on his knees as he takes a couple of deep breaths. Then, sounding more defeated than I’ve ever heard him, he admits, “I did it.”

My heart stutters in my chest as I rush to Hudson’s side.

Rafael apparently hasn’t caught up with the program, though, because he has a confused look on his face as he asks, “Did what?”

Still, it must only take a couple of seconds for the truth of who he is talking to—and what Hudson is capable of—to hit him, because his eyes suddenly go wide. “Wait a minute. Are you saying that you...” Rafael’s voice trails off as he searches for the right verb to describe Hudson’s power.

“Poofed.” Mekhi fills in the missing word. “You poofed the wolves?” This time when he says it, he uses his hands to mimic something exploding.

“Are you really that surprised?” Hudson asks, dragging in breaths. “I *did* bring down a stadium.”

“Yeah, but that’s not that hard,” Liam interjects. “Even Jaxon could have done that—”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Jaxon deadpans at the same time Hudson quotes, “Damning with faint praise.”

But Liam’s mind is too blown to apologize to my former mate...or my current

mate, for that matter. Instead, he continues to turn around, searching the room, as he says, “He poofed the wolves, Jaxon. He just—” This time, he’s the one who makes the hand gesture for exploding. “Poofed them.”

When Hudson doesn’t straighten back up, I get on my knees in front of him, lift his bent head to look into his eyes, and what I see nearly breaks my heart wide open. It’s not the pain etched in the grit of his jaw, the anguish in the depths of his oceanic eyes that wrecks me. It’s the fact that in the next instant, he blinks—and the agony is gone like it never existed. In its place is a cold, dark wall that I know isn’t just Hudson trying to hide the pain from me. He’s hiding it from himself as well.

“They were going for Grace,” Hudson murmurs, like that explains everything.

For as long as I’ve known him, he’s tried not to use this power against anyone. To destroy a building? Sure. To blow up a forest? Absolutely. To eviscerate an island? Yeah, if he absolutely has to.

But today he murdered those wolves in the blink of an eye—not one, but dozens and dozens, maybe more. And he didn’t hesitate...*to save me.*

The realization wrings the breath from my chest. I feel awful. Awful that so many people have died in this horrible war of Cyrus’s and even more awful that Hudson had to be the one to do this—and that he did it to protect me.

And I’ve absolutely failed to protect *him*. Which is pretty much my most important job as his mate.

Killing all those wolves shattered him and, in doing so, shattered me as well.

As though no one can tell Hudson and I are grappling to put the pieces of our souls back together, the rest continue the debate around us.

“They were definitely going for her,” Flint agrees with narrowed eyes. “But the question is, why her specifically?”

“Luca’s dad said Cyrus wanted her dead,” Eden reminds him.

“Of course my father wants Grace dead,” Jaxon snarls. “When has he ever been okay with someone having power he can’t control? And now that she’s got the Crown? He’ll be gunning for her double-time with everything he’s got.”

“Which is nothing new,” I tell them, hoping to calm everyone down just a little so I can focus on Hudson. “He’s always had it out for me.”

“There’s having it out for you, and then there’s wanting to crush you for the specific purpose of sucking every drop of power from your dead body,” Jaxon shoots back. “The first is normal. The second is sociopathic and means you have a giant target on your head.”

“Which makes me wonder why exactly we’re still standing here,” Mekhi

comments, brows raised sardonically. “Considering Cyrus probably has a second wave on the way.”

“He definitely has a second wave on the way.” Dawud glances at the stairs where the wolves were standing less than a minute ago.

“Were they from your den?” I ask quietly.

“No,” they whisper.

Knowing that doesn’t make me feel any better—and it doesn’t make Hudson feel better, either, judging from the look on his face.

“Screw packing a bag,” Flint says, even as he scans the horizon for signs of more paranormals. “We need to get the fuck out of here.”

“Whatever we need, we can buy when we get someplace safe,” Eden agrees as she moves to one of the windows on the south side of the castle and begins to watch the area for any sign of an incoming attack.

“Is there any place safe we can go at the moment?” Byron asks quietly. “If Cyrus could turn Marise against us, then who’s left we can trust?”

It’s a terrifying question, one that doesn’t bear thinking about. Not when we have nowhere to call home. Everyone chooses to use our last few minutes to debate where we can go next. I decide to let them sort that question out themselves so I can take a moment and focus on Hudson. I reach up to cup his cheek.

“I’m fine,” Hudson tries to assure me and stands to his full height again, turns to look out the window. But the hand he runs through his hair is shaking.

“No, you’re not. But you will be,” I whisper as we stare out at the gray Alaskan sky. It’s as empty of activity as Katmere’s halls this morning, but that doesn’t mean much, considering any witch who’s ever been to Katmere can open a portal up right in the middle of the common room—or anywhere else, for that matter. Not to mention the fact that an entire pack of wolves somehow got in here, and we never even saw them coming.

How that happened is a question for later, though, because right now I’m focused on my mate.

“I’m fine,” Hudson repeats, but he’s trying to convince himself more than me this time.

“You look like hell,” I say bluntly. “And I know what you just did wasn’t easy for you.”

His face closes up. “That’s where you’re wrong. It was *extremely* easy for me.” He gives a harsh laugh. “Isn’t that the problem?”

“I know *exactly* what the problem is, Hudson.”



When he looks away, jaw working, I know I've struck a nerve.

More concerning to me, though, is he actually looks sick. I know he just expended a shit ton of energy, and I'm sure that's part of it, but that isn't the main part. I've seen him use his power before, seen him use more power than even this took on the Unkillable Beast's island, and he never broke a sweat.

So the way he's currently got his hands in his pockets so I won't see them shake isn't normal. Neither is the way he's locking his knees to make sure he doesn't go down. Something is really wrong with Hudson, and I'd bet breakfast it has more to do with the fact that he just killed a whole lot of people than it does the fact that he used too much power.

"Hey." I wrap an arm around his waist for support. "Can I help?"

I expect him to pull away, maybe crack one of those ridiculously dry jokes of his like he always does. Instead, he sinks into me, and I can tell his hands aren't the only things that are shaking. His entire body is trembling like he's in shock.

And maybe he is. He's wrestled with using his power for so long, and then to have it happen like this—so fast and almost out of his control—has to have freaked him out.

I snuggle in a little closer and whisper, "I love you, no matter what."

A shudder runs through him at my words, and his eyes close for several long seconds. When he opens them, they're filled with the same resolve I usually see from him. Which is pretty much all I can hope for at this point.

But I have to do something. Anything to help him move past this. So I tilt my face up to his and say, "I think I finally know what promise you made with my ring."

At first, he doesn't respond. Doesn't even acknowledge what I've said. But then, ever so slowly, his gaze meets mine, and one eyebrow goes up. "Do you?"

I'm so relieved he's going to play along that I squeeze his waist before answering, "You promised to always do all the dishes for me."

He can't help the chuckle that escapes as he asks, "Why would I ever promise to do dishes when I don't *use* dishes?"

Then his gaze slides down to my neck, and a blush steals up my cheeks. Oh man, I walked right into that one. But as heat thaws the ice in his gaze, I sigh. There he is. My Hudson is coming back to me. Relief washing over me, weakening my knees, I lean into his strength.

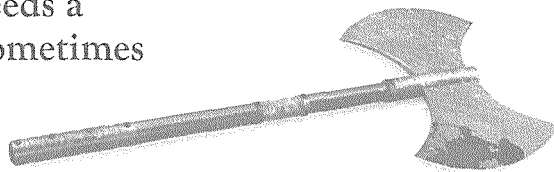
His lips brush the top of my forehead before he whispers in my ear, "Thank you." And it sounds an awful lot like *I love you*.

Before I can respond, someone's cell dings, and the moment is gone as we both turn to see what's happening.

"My aunt just texted that we can hide out at the Witch Court with her," Macy says from the other side of the main common room, where she and Eden have positioned themselves to watch the school's back windows. "It'll only take me five minutes to build a portal."

"We don't have five more minutes," Hudson says grimly. "They're coming."

## Everybody Needs a Little Push Sometimes



“**W**here are they?” Jaxon’s at the window before I can turn around to look. “Fuck.”

“I don’t see any—” I break off as my human/gargoyle eyes finally notice what their vampire eyes picked up on seconds ago.

Hundreds and hundreds of wolves racing across the mountainside and clearing to get to Katmere. To get to us.

“Let’s go!” Hudson orders, and the rest of us don’t have to be told twice. “Head to the back of the school!”

I grab on to him, and he fades us through the narrow corridors, Jaxon and the others hot on our heels. With no room to change into their dragons as we dash through the school, Flint and Eden are struggling to keep up, so Jaxon takes hold of Flint and pours on the speed.

Byron does the same with Eden, and though both dragons curse at the insult of being carried by vampires, neither pulls away. Right now, every second counts, and we all know it.

Shockingly, Dawud has no trouble keeping up with the fading vampires—apparently, they really are as fast as they say.

We make it to the giant rear doors less than a minute later—which is a really good thing, considering it would normally take me several minutes to get there.

Mekhi is manning the door, ready to tear any intruders apart. “It’s all clear out here,” he says after a quick look outside.

“Everyone, head to the art cottage across the field,” Jaxon commands. “Macy can build a portal there. I’ll stay and hold them off.”

The Order starts to protest, but Hudson interrupts. “I’ll stay with him.”

“No!” I exclaim, panic racing through me at the thought of anything happening to Hudson or Jaxon. “We all stay or we all go.”

“Grace, you have to trust me,” Hudson says as he grabs my hands. “Jaxon and

I can handle these assholes. We'll be right behind you as soon as the portal opens."

"The Order will stay as well," Mekhi volunteers, but Jaxon shakes his head.

"You need to protect Grace. If Marise is right and Cyrus is stealing magic to power something—and the only thing that can stop him is Grace—we have to keep her safe."

"I can keep myself—"

"The Order will protect her with their lives," Jaxon interrupts, tapping his chest with a closed fist, and the Order answers with the same gesture, as though that decides everything.

Annoyance snakes through me, and I'm about to protest the massive display of *you don't get a vote* when there's a loud crash from the cafeteria. It's followed by the snarls of wolves so close that a shiver races along my spine.

"Jaxon's right, Grace. Cyrus himself came to that island to try to keep you from getting the Crown. We don't know how it works yet, but I agree with Jaxon—if he's afraid of you having it, there must be a reason." Hudson rushes through the words. "You need to get the hell out of here. We'll be right behind you. I promise."

"I can't—" I begin before Hudson interrupts.

"Grace." This time there's more bite in his words. "I fought an entire prison population. I can survive some mangy wolves. But if you don't leave now, I'll have no choice but to disintegrate them instead of just maiming the fuckers."

My chest feels like it's going to crack wide open. I'd do anything for Hudson to never have to use his gift again, but the idea of leaving him and Jaxon to fight an army of wolves alone makes me sick. Not when there's strength in numbers. We've always been at our best together...why can't Hudson see that?

Then again, maybe he can. Hudson would never keep me out of a fight for fear I couldn't hold my own. Which means he really does think he has this and needs me out of the way so he doesn't use his gift to kill again the second a wolf gets close to me.

The realization only worries me more—he must be even worse off than I thought if he's that afraid he might lose control.

Which is why I nod and take a step back even though it's the last thing I want to do.

Relief flashes across his face as he throws me a half smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "I swear, I've got this, Grace."

And he does. I know he does. But that doesn't mean leaving him here to fight an army of wolves who want to rip him apart is any easier. My chest tightens,

and I lift my gaze to his.

I take a moment to memorize the high cheekbones framing his deep blue eyes, the hard line of his jaw, the rich brown hair still perfectly styled in its usual pompadour.

Then I whisper, “You better,” before giving him a quick, hard kiss. I promise myself this won’t be the last time I see my mate as I turn and shout, “Let’s go!” to the rest of the gang.

They spring into action, and I grab my platinum string as Flint kicks open the doors. I hit the skies, my giant wings eating up the short distance to the cottage in mere seconds.

Macy immediately gets to work opening a portal while Flint insists he should go back and crispy-fry Cyrus’s army.

Mekhi shakes his head. “That’s Jaxon and Hudson up there. They’ll hold them off.”

“You don’t know that,” I say, upset because everyone thinks Jaxon and Hudson are so invincible. But they aren’t. I’ve seen them both struggle, and I’ve seen them both bleed. They can get hurt—they can *die*—just like the rest of us. My stomach twists, and suddenly I’m afraid I’ve made a terrible mistake.

“We never should have left them,” Flint says, and he sounds as freaked out as I feel.

Rafael was the last to fade to us, and his eyes find mine. “Like Hudson said, they’ve got this,” he assures me. “Don’t worry.”

“How many are there?” Flint demands.

Rafael just shakes his head. “They’ll be fine,” he repeats.

He might be more believable if he didn’t look so shaken—and if a new series of snarls wasn’t coming from the school. Snarls that are followed immediately by a handful of loud thuds, crashes, and then, finally, high-pitched animal whines.

“What can we do?” Eden asks Macy, who is swirling fire between her hands as the very beginning of a portal emerges.

“Just be ready to jump through as soon as I get it open,” Macy says, her hands a blur of movement as she works through the intricate portal magic.

“I’m with her,” Dawud says, speaking for the first time since they slid to a stop next to the cottage. “I didn’t risk everything to warn you so that you’d die here anyway.”

Mekhi agrees, though he sounds as desperate as I feel when he says, “As soon as Macy gets that portal open, we need to go through it.”

“They’ll be right behind us,” Byron adds, his eyes steady on mine. “I promise,

Grace. I wouldn't leave if I thought they couldn't do this alone."

I glare at him. "You would if *Jaxon* ordered you to get us out of here."

He looks away, jaw working. I've hit closer to home than I thought.

But before I can even begin to process that, the ground shakes and the whole building rumbles. I forget how to swallow as I figure out what's happening.

Jaxon is using Katmere itself to fight them off—which means there must be a hell of a lot more wolves than we imagined.

I turn to Macy. "We're almost out of time."

Macy nods, moving her hands in an intricate pattern that has the portal changing shape and color before her. With one final movement, she exclaims, "I've got it!"

"Get going!" Byron shouts. "We don't have any more time."

I feel like I'm being wrenched apart. They don't actually expect me to leave Hudson and Jaxon here. I can't do that. I can't just walk away from my mate and hope he makes it. How could any of them even think that I could?

There's no time to tell Byron that, because Katmere shakes right in front of us. The whole structure literally *trembles* as large cracks slash through the walls, causing stones at the top to tumble to the ground with a thundering crash.

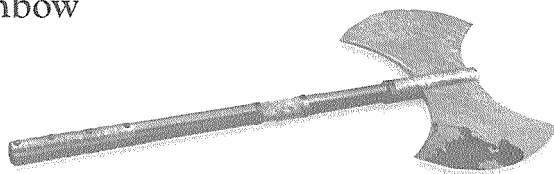
"Holy shit," Flint breathes, eyes wide with the same horror tearing through me. "They're really going to do it. They're going to bring it all down."

Just the idea is a knife to my gut. Then again, the thought of losing Hudson or Jaxon is a full-on rocket launcher.

"You go ahead," I tell the others. "I'm going to wait for—"

I break off with a gasp as Eden pushes me straight toward the portal.

## Taste the Rainbow



I stumble, pinwheeling my arms until I feel like a wind chime on a stormy day in a desperate effort to regain my balance.

But it's too late. Eden's push was too deliberate and too well-placed. I fall backward straight into the portal, which turns out to be even worse than my normal method of diving headfirst because I have even less control over my body in reverse.

I spend what feels like forever but is probably only a few seconds tumbling through Macy's psychedelic rainbows. Every witch's portal looks and feels different—hence the variations in portals on the Ludaes field—and my cousin's are always made up of giant sparkling rainbows. Which isn't exactly a surprise and which I normally don't mind. But somersaulting backward through them against my will feels like I'm on a sugar high gone wrong.

When the portal finally spits me out onto a cold, hard, white marble floor, I get flipped over and land flat on my face.

Note to self: never complain about landing on my butt again, because hitting the ground face-first and then having the rest of me do a giant belly flop is absolutely no fun.

I take a few seconds to catch my breath, then roll over with a groan, only to find myself staring at a white carved ceiling filled with swirling wildflowers and ornate curlicues.

I only have a few seconds to wonder where the hell I am before Eden lands right next to me—on her feet, of course. It's all I can do to keep from snarling.

Another note to self: never trust a dragon with attitude problems and a freakishly good sense of balance.

"What the hell was that for?" I demand, pushing aside the hand she offers to help me up. "You had no right—"

"I had every right," she shoots back. "You weren't going to go through the

portal, and you needed to.”

“Hudson and Jaxon—”

“Hudson and Jaxon are two of the most powerful vampires in existence. They can handle this—as long as they’re not distracted worrying about *you*.” She steps out of the way as Mekhi comes through the portal. “Getting you out of there made it easier for them to do what they need to do.”

“She’s right,” Mekhi agrees as he, too, offers me a hand up. This time I take it, ignoring the roll of Eden’s eyes as he pulls me to my feet just as the others come through the portal, one after another.

“They can do this, Grace,” he continues. “We just have to—”

He breaks off as the sound of walls collapsing echoes through the room. We whirl around just in time to see Macy flying through the portal opening. She lands on her knees but is up in seconds, holding her arms out high and wide.

Her eyes are wild and her face is smudged with dirt, but her focus never wavers from the portal that is growing ever wider as we stand here.

Usually Macy is the last one through and the portal closes as soon as she exits. But not this time. This time, she’s using every ounce of power she has to hold it open from this side—something I didn’t even know was possible.

Judging from the looks on the others’ faces, they didn’t think it could be done, either. But if I’ve learned nothing over the last few months, it’s that my happy, bubbly cousin has immense magic inside her. I really believe she can do anything she sets her mind to—including this.

*Please, God, let her be able to do this.*

“Holy shit,” Dawud breathes, and I get it. I really do.

I’ve never looked at the back side of an open portal before, and as I do, I realize that beyond the swirling rainbow colors, I can still see the grassy field spanning between the cottage and Katmere. Except, even in the small amount of time it took us to get through the passage, everything has changed.

The walls and tower on the west side are completely gone, lying in a pile of rubble and dust, and I gasp, my hand covering my mouth to stop the scream balancing on my tongue. Because the rest of the school is not far behind, if the earsplitting groan of stone and wood and everything I used to call home is anything to go by.

I’m both happy and terrified of that shaking—and the way the walls are literally being cleaved into pieces. Happy, because it means Jaxon and Hudson are still alive. Terrified, because what if they don’t get out in time? What if they end up trapped beneath Katmere’s tumbling walls along with everyone else?



"I can't hold it much longer—" She breaks off with a small scream, her face pained as she struggles to hold the portal open.

*Please, please, please.* The word is a mantra in my mind as I position myself next to Macy, one hand on her shoulder. A plea to the universe to save Hudson and Jaxon against what feels like all the odds. I don't have magic the way my cousin does, but I can channel power. I've done it before—with Macy and with Remy.

Holding my arm in a straight line out in front of me, I close my eyes. Take a deep breath. And open myself up to the power all around me. The earth, the trees, the stone. There's power there, but not enough. "I need more power!" I shout.

A hand lands on my shoulder as Flint says, "Take mine." And I understand immediately, tossing him a grateful smile as I reach for his string and channel his magic into the portal.

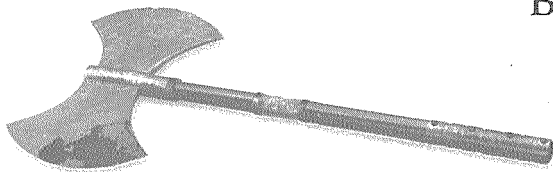
The Order and Eden step forward next, so many hands on my arms and shoulders. So many different-colored threads to juggle, so many different fears and hopes and abilities to navigate through, and so little time in which to do it.

In the end, I give up on trying to distinguish one power—one person—from the other. And instead, I reach out and scoop up every string I can with my left hand.

Power—huge, unimaginable, *unmanageable* power—rips through me so fast and hard that it nearly knocks me off my feet. I lock my knees, ground myself, and somehow manage to stay upright even as what feels like massive bolts of electricity course through me.

There's no time to absorb it, no time to learn how to finesse it. Katmere is falling before my very eyes, and the only two guys I've ever loved are right in the middle of it. So, without a second thought, I take all the power I have and throw it straight at the portal. Macy might not be able to hold it open alone, but together—with all the power in my friends—maybe, just maybe, we can buy Hudson and Jaxon the time they need.

## 20

Bringing Down  
the House

Macy gasps as the power I'm channeling hits her magic, but she manages to hold on—we both do—pouring everything we can into that portal. Into holding it open just a little bit longer.

And it works, because even as we start to shake, the portal grows wider. And wider.

It grows so large, we can see everything. The entire school. The fields on either side. The cottages. Even the ominous thunderclouds covering the sky above.

But that's not what has my attention, has every breath almost too painful to draw into my aching lungs. What I can't take my eyes from is the last section of Katmere still standing, the last tiny portion—where I know Hudson and Jaxon are still fighting.

"Come on, come on," Mekhi mutters, as fixated on the open portal as we are.

And then we see them. Both Vega brothers fade to a stop just outside the doors into the rear courtyard, the remaining walls of the school still surrounding them.

"Stop showboating and get the fuck into the portal," Flint growls as Jaxon raises a hand and slashes it downward, a huge section of wall tumbling to the ground. Hudson pivots and faces another section of wall, and the middle portion instantly turns to dust, causing the upper bricks to tumble down around him.

And from the debris and dust...hundreds of wolves emerge, surrounding them. I don't even wonder for a moment why Hudson hasn't disintegrated the remaining wolves. I know why. I saw what killing that way did to him earlier, and he'd only do that ever again as a last resort—or if he were too weak.

Fear claws at my insides, but I tamp it down, determined not to let it take hold of me. Determined not to let it interfere with the power I'm currently channeling, the power still growing in my veins and making my muscles tremble.

Jaxon lifts a hand, and another wall splits in half and topples down on the

closest wolves.

But that means rocks are falling on Hudson and Jaxon, too, and watching it happen is truly terrifying.

Yes, they're vampires.

Yes, they're powerful.

Yes, it takes a lot to kill them.

But everyone in that castle is a paranormal, and it's going to take a lot to stop *any* of them. Maybe even more than Hudson and Jaxon can safely give.

It's that thought that has my hands shaking and my knees knocking together.

Even the Order watches the portal with narrowed eyes and clenched fists.

Eden screeches, "Get in the damn portal!"

But they can't hear her any more than they can hear the silent screams deep inside me. Not that it matters. I know both of them well enough to know that they wouldn't listen even if they could. They'll die to protect us, and if that means bringing Katmere down on top of themselves, I have no doubt they'll do it.

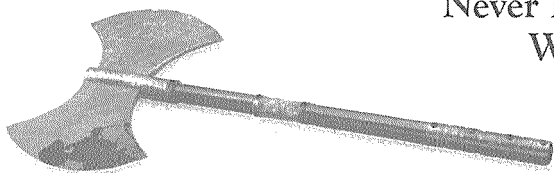
That fear propels me to reach deep inside myself, reaching for power like it's the air I breathe, and taking it in, letting it consume me, feed my cells and heart and lungs, gathering every ounce of power I can find and pouring it into helping Macy hold open the portal as it narrows and wavers.

But then a loud creaking sound fills the air. And everything falls apart.

The last thing I see is thousands of pounds of rubble pouring down on Hudson's and Jaxon's heads.

## 21

### Never Bite the Vamp Who Feeds You



“It’s gone!” Macy screams, staring into the portal.  
“What’s gone?” Liam shouts. But the look on his face says that, like the rest of us, he already knows.

It’s Katmere.

Katmere is gone. And with it, Jaxon and Hudson?

Just the thought has my knees buckling, and I almost hit the ground, probably would have if everyone weren’t still holding on to me.

“Macy!” I shout as the skies finally unleash their fury, drenching the rubble in pelting rain and shaking the ground with frightening thunder and lightning. As if the universe is just as upset as I am that my school, the last symbol of my childhood, is truly gone.

Suddenly, the magic I’m channeling causes the portal to wobble as I lose a bit of control.

Before Macy can answer, the portal burns bright, electric blue for one second, two—and then it explodes as Jaxon and Hudson burst out of it.

Relief swamps me, but it’s short-lived because the second the portal snaps closed, all the energy I’ve been channeling to hold it open rebounds and slams into me so hard that I go flying—straight over Mekhi’s and the rest of my friends’ heads.

I brace myself for impact—it happened so fast, I can’t even find my platinum string, let alone grab it—but just as I’m about to hit the ground, Hudson plucks me out of midair and pulls me straight into his arms.

He’s filthy—covered in rock and dirt and God only knows what else—and his heart is beating so fast and hard beneath my cheek that it kind of feels like I’m being smacked in the face over and over again. But I don’t care, because right now, there is absolutely nowhere I’d rather be.

“Holy shit!” Rafael exclaims. “I really didn’t think you two were going to

make it this time.”

“You’re not the only one,” Jaxon answers. He’s standing in the center of the room, hands braced on his knees as he pulls in a series of long, deep breaths.

“It’s all good,” Hudson says, shrugging off his very-near-death experience in typical Hudson fashion. I swear, he could be bleeding to death right here and he would still be completely nonchalant. “We were just biding our time, waiting for you to get settled. You know how much my baby brother loves making a grand entrance.”

Jaxon doesn’t even bother looking up from where he’s still gasping for air—but he does take a second to flip Hudson off and snort. “So says the guy who thinks the entire world’s a stage.”

“I swear, that boy will say anything to get me to give him an encore,” Hudson tells him even as he settles me back on my feet and strokes my wild curls back from my face.

“Why was I even worried?” I ask, exasperated.

His grin is wicked, but his eyes are filled with tenderness as he gazes down at me. “I have no idea.”

“Yeah, me neither.” Still, I bury my face against his chest and take a few seconds to breathe him in. To let the terror go and give myself a chance to come to grips with the fact that he’s okay. That they both are. They made it out against all the odds, and that is what matters.

Eventually, though, reality intrudes on my relief as Macy asks, “Katmere?”

The hope in her voice is painful to hear, especially when Hudson stiffens against me. “I’m sorry,” he says, voice aching. “We had to bring it down.”

“There were too many of them,” Jaxon adds. “They were everywhere. There was no other way.”

Macy nods, but she still looks like she’s been punched in the stomach. Not that I blame her. Her father’s been kidnapped, maybe killed, and now the only home she’s ever known is gone. I know what that feels like, and I wouldn’t wish it on anyone, let alone my sweet, kind, amazing cousin.

“It’s going to be okay,” Eden tells her as she rubs a comforting hand up and down Macy’s back.

“We’ll find a way to fix it,” I agree, pulling away from Hudson so I can go to Macy and hug her. “I don’t know how, but we will.”

“After we free my brother,” Dawud interjects, their voice like steel.

“You aren’t the only one with family there, you know,” Macy shoots back. “Cyrus has my father. Believe me, no one wants to get to the Vampire Court and

free them more than we do.”

“But we can’t just go storming in there,” Byron says. “Or he’ll kill every single one of them—starting with the people we care about most.”

Just the thought of losing Uncle Finn and Gwen and everyone else sends ice skating down my spine. “To be honest, I don’t get why every parent with a kid at Katmere isn’t storming the Vampire Court,” I say with a shake of my head. “Why aren’t they demanding that Cyrus release their kids?”

“The dragons can’t,” Flint says grimly. “I talked to my dad after I left the infirmary, and he said things are a mess at Court. We lost a lot of dragons in the fight on the island, and the ones who are left are questioning my mother’s leadership because she—” He breaks off, throat working.

“Because she gave up her dragon to save me,” Jaxon finishes flatly.

Flint doesn’t answer. In fact, he doesn’t even look Jaxon’s way as tension—taut, slippery, dangerous—simmers in the air between them.

“The wolves won’t go against him,” Dawud contributes. “They have his word that he won’t hurt any of their children.”

“So why do they think he kidnapped them?” Mekhi asks, his tone rife with skepticism. “I mean, holding people against their will is pretty much the defining characteristic of someone with bad intentions.”

“I don’t disagree,” Dawud answers with a shrug. “But they just keep drinking the Kool-Aid. They can’t see the truth—or maybe they won’t let themselves. Either way, there’s no convincing them that he’s anything other than what he tells them he is.”

“Which is what exactly?” Jaxon asks, his voice so distant, it’s like he’s talking about some stranger and not his father.

“You mean, besides a monster?” Hudson asks archly.

“He’s the king who will save them from obscurity, of course. The one who will bring them into the light and make it so they don’t have to hide who they are anymore.” Dawud shakes their head. “I mean, anyone with a brain knows it’s bullshit. But they’re eating it up like it’s ice cream with a cherry on top. There’s no way to convince them otherwise.”

“And dying is what? An unfortunate side effect?” Hudson’s voice drips sarcasm, but there’s something in his eyes—a mixture of regret and resolve—that has me reaching for the blue string deep inside me.

I run a hand down our mating bond, pouring all the love and comfort I can into my touch. I know he doesn’t want anyone else to know just how tormented he is over what happened with the wolves earlier, and this is the only way I can

think of to offer support at the moment.

If it works.

Moments later, I have the satisfaction of watching my mate's eyes go wide. His gaze meets mine across the room, and the sudden warmth there makes me smile. As does the relief ripping through him, burning away the pain and the regret. At least for now.

"Especially then," Liam answers quietly. "There's nothing quite like dying for something you believe in."

The horror of his answer echoes through the room, along with the knowledge that he's right. And so is Dawud. How many times have we been willing to die to stop Cyrus over the last several months? How many times have we almost sacrificed everything because we know that stopping him is the right thing—the only thing—to do?

But what if we were on the other side? What if we believed in him as fiercely as we despise him and everything he stands for? What if we really thought that he was doing the right thing, and anyone who opposed him was trying to hurt us, our children, and the world we were working so hard to build?

The thought makes me shudder—partly because it's so awful to think of so many wolves and vampires buying into Cyrus's horrible agenda and partly because I'm really beginning to understand what we're up against. And it is overwhelming.

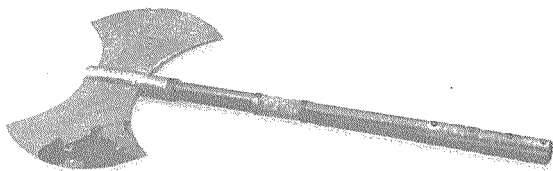
"What do we do?" I whisper, the horror of my realization evident in my voice.

"First step?" Rafael asks from where he's leaning against the wall, knee bent and face impassive. "I say we figure out exactly where we are and whether or not we're safe here."

"Oh, that's easy," Macy tells him. "We're at the Witch Court. And of *course* we're safe—"

She breaks off as the door crashes open and what looks to be half of what must be the Witch Guard, given their uniforms, pours into the room, wands raised and ready to fire.

## 22

All Bark,  
Extra Bite

“You need to leave,” the witch leading the guard says. She is tall and menacing and, judging from the insignia on her purple uniform robes, also one of the top members of this army. “Now.”

“Leave?” Macy asks, mystified. “But we just got here, Valentina.”

“And now you can go somewhere else.” Valentina’s eyes are icy as she waves her wand between Hudson, Jaxon, and me. “The Witch Guard has no room for the likes of you here.”

“The likes of us?” My cousin is beginning to sound like a pissed-off parrot, fury turning her voice more than a little squawky as she repeats Valentina’s words back to her. “I’m a witch, and these are my friends. We’re here for sanctuary.”

As she speaks, she moves between Valentina’s wand and Jaxon, Hudson, and me. I don’t like Macy using herself as a shield for us, and it’s obvious the guys don’t, either, but when we step to move out from behind her, she shoots us a warning look that has all of us freezing in place.

Who knew Macy could be so intimidating when she put her mind to it? There’s a part of me that’s very impressed—or will be, once these witches put down their damn wands.

“You’ll find no sanctuary here—for you or your friends,” Valentina snarls.

“Yeah, well, the *Witch Guard* doesn’t get to make that decision. Only a king and queen can deny sanctuary,” Macy shoots back.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you.” Valentina twists her thin lips into a smirk. “They already have.”

Jaxon stiffens at that revelation, but a glance at Hudson shows me that he isn’t the least bit surprised. And truth be told, neither am I. If what Dawud has been telling us is true, it’s almost impossible to know who stands with Cyrus and who doesn’t. If the Witch Court has fallen to him, then we’re lucky that all they’re doing is denying us sanctuary and ordering us to leave.



It could be so much worse.

Macy apparently hasn't gotten that memo, though, because she steps forward until she is nose to nose with Valentina. "I don't believe you."

Valentina lifts a brow, but she doesn't back down an inch as she answers. "I don't care if you believe me or not, little girl. All I care about is that you and your friends leave the Witch Court. *Now*."

"Or what?" Macy demands, a question that has me wincing, because now is definitely not the time to issue ultimatums or call bluffs.

Not when the guard is this annoyed. And definitely not when, behind the guard leader, her troops are growing restless. I mean, we're doing the same over here, anxiety and exhaustion combining to make us all a little volatile. Of course, we aren't the ones wielding deadly weapons. I mean, unless you count six pairs of fangs and two fire- and ice-breathing dragons...which they probably are.

"Do you really want to find out?" Valentina queries.

"Not even a little bit," Macy replies as she reaches into her fanny pack for her wand. "But I guess I'm going to have to, because one way or another, I will speak to the king and queen."

And there it is, the ultimatum I've been dreading. Hudson and Jaxon obviously recognize it, too, considering they're shifting beside me, their hands clenching and eyes narrowing as they focus on their targets. Which makes me reach deep inside myself and grab hold of my platinum string. I don't know why Macy is so adamant about seeing the king and queen, but I'm willing to go along with it. Even if it means fighting the entire Witch Guard.

I pull my platinum string and shift to my gargoyle form in the space between one breath and the next. At the same time, Jaxon lets loose with a tremor that shakes the whole room.

This time it's Valentina's eyes that narrow at the threat. Behind her, wands sweep through the air, and we brace ourselves for an incoming attack. But just as the wands begin to lower, a woman in elaborate purple robes appears in the doorway.

"Enough!" she snaps, and immediately the guard stands down. "I will not condone violence against a fellow witch." Her strange violet eyes cut from the guards to Macy as she continues. "A child claiming sanctuary at that."

"My orders were clear—"

"Yes, well, I'm changing your orders. Bring them to the main hall. If my sister is choosing to deny this child sanctuary, she owes her—and the entire Court—an explanation. So let's get to it."

The queen's sister whirls around, disappearing from the doorway as quickly as she appeared.

For a second, nobody moves. But then wands are lowered and Valentina steps grudgingly back from Macy, who gives her a surprisingly sunny smile in response. The smile obviously gets on Valentina's last nerve, because this time she's the one who gets in Macy's face. "If one of you so much as *looks* at the king or queen the wrong way, I will cut out your organs and use them in the most heinous spell I can find."

As far as threats go, it's a pretty good one—especially because none of us wants our organs cut out but also because she says it with a *lot* of sincerity. And since I have no desire to set her or her torture-happy wand off, I change back to my human form. Considering how on edge everyone at the Witch Court is right now, it seems best to appear as nonthreatening as possible.

I want to tell Hudson to do the same thing, but who am I kidding? Even standing there in a pair of worn jeans and a black button-up shirt, he radiates strength, confidence, power. Everything that Cyrus is afraid of...and everything that he covets.

"Follow me," Valentina orders. "And don't even think about stepping one foot toward anything but the main hall."

Then she turns on her heel and walks out of the room at a fast, steady clip. When we don't immediately fall into line and follow her, the Witch Guard starts rounding us up, herding us inexorably toward the door.

"I'm sorry," Macy whispers as we pour into a long, wide hallway. "I didn't know where else to go, and I really thought we would be safe here."

"Just because Valentina woke up on the wrong side of the cauldron doesn't mean we're not safe," I tell her as I wrap an arm around her shoulder for a quick hug. "What's the worst thing they could do to us?"

"Were you not listening?" Dawud asks, eyes wide in an obvious *duh* expression. "Rip out our hearts and use them in a love spell."

"She's all bark," Macy says.

"Yeah," Mekhi agrees with a snort. "If by *all bark*, you mean even more bite. That woman is more than capable of feeding us to her favorite familiar and then setting that familiar on fire just to make a point."

"And what point would that be exactly?" Rafael asks with a lift of his brow.

"That you're not as special as you think you are," Valentina snaps over her shoulder. "And my favorite familiar is an octopus. So good luck with that."

She doesn't say another word as we continue down the hallway—and neither

do the rest of us. But there's not a lot to say about that.

Except, *Octopus*? Eden mouths.

Macy gives a little shrug. "Better than an emu."

"Do you actually know someone who has an emu as a familiar?" Jaxon asks, his disbelief obvious.

"I know someone who has a *vampire* as a familiar," Macy shoots back.

"And we know emus are smarter than that," Flint jokes.

It's pretty obvious he's trying to get a rise out of Jaxon. It doesn't work, of course, but the rest of the Order squawks their objections while Hudson just laughs.

For the first time since we got back to Katmere from the island, I feel like I can breathe. Like maybe, just maybe, the world won't come crashing down on us this very second. Ten seconds from now is a different story, of course, but for now, I'll take this very, very brief reprieve and the chance to laugh with my friends before everything goes to hell yet again.

Maybe because I'm not completely terrified at this exact moment, I take the chance to look around for the first time. And what my initial glimpse shows me is that the Witch Court is absolutely nothing like the Dragon or Gargoyle Courts—which are the only other Courts I've been to.

Whereas the Dragon Court is all sleek, Manhattan sophistication, and the Gargoyle Court seems to have gotten stuck back in Medieval times, the Witch Court is stately elegance with an emphasis on elaborate art and even more elaborate architecture. The hallway is lined with carved walls highlighting the elements, as well as the sun, moon, and stars. In between the carvings are giant, fanciful picture frames made of real gold. Inside are paintings of sky-blue-clad witches forming magic circles and landscapes featuring wooded scenes. And there are candles everywhere. Red, purple, black, white, gold, they fill the sconces carved into the walls every few feet.

Half of them are lit and half of them aren't, I realize at the same time I notice two witches—one on either side—walking the hallway several yards in front of us. Each is holding a long, ceremonial-looking lighter, which they use to light the candles.

"They don't use magic?" I whisper to Macy, who shakes her head adamantly.

"We're taught from an early age that magic shouldn't be squandered. It comes at a cost—to us, to the natural world, to the very universe around us—so to use it for something as mundane as lighting non-ceremonial candles just isn't done. Especially since they have to be lit every day at this time. The queen insists,

despite the fact that we have actual lights that work perfectly well.”

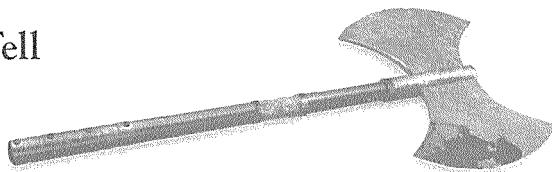
She starts to say something else but stops abruptly as we approach two giant French doors. Like so much of this castle, they are made of real gold engraved with garlands of flowers. But each of these flowers is inlaid with different-colored semiprecious and precious stones—rubies, emeralds, sapphires, lapis, quartz, turquoise, and a bunch more that I recognize but can’t name.

It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that we’re about to enter the hall where the king and queen receive guests. Even if the ridiculously expensive doors didn’t all but scream that to the world, the fact that Macy is standing at attention for pretty much the first time ever would have tipped me off. Every member of the Witch Guard is doing the same thing—especially Valentina.

“Treat them with the respect they are due,” she warns as she straightens her cape. “Or I will make you wish you had never been born.”

Then, before we can even process her warning, she steps forward, and the big, heavy gold doors begin to swing open. “Welcome,” she says through gritted teeth, “to the Great Hall of the Witch Court.”

## All the Show, None of the Tell



Several seconds pass before the doors swing open completely, and I can't help but get a good look at the Great Hall as we wait. And can I just say, "Great Hall" is the perfect name for this place? "Throne Room" also works, as does "Ostentatious Display of Wealth."

It seems strange, because based on what I know of Macy and Uncle Finn, I never would have expected the Witch Court to look like this. The Vampire Court? Hell yes. Absolutely. But the witches I know at Katmere are more down-to-earth. Less consumed by flaunting their power and their money.

Then again, it is Court. Based on what I know of old-time kings and queens, flaunting your power is pretty much the whole point of holding court.

Still, as we walk into the Great Hall, I realize I only *thought* the hallway was elaborate. It's actually quite plain when compared to this room with its massive frescoes on the ceiling, gigantic chandeliers, and floor-to-ceiling paintings that cover every part of the walls that aren't a giant, silk-bedecked window.

The floor itself is made of gold-veined marble to match all the gold around the room, and even the furniture is extravagant and oversize. Especially the thrones, which are made of pure gold inlaid with gemstones the size of my fist and have purple satin cushions on the seats and backs—my guess is they are a concession to the fact that solid gold is probably not that fun to sit on.

At the same time, anyone who wants a solid-gold throne probably doesn't care if it's hard to sit on as long as it looks powerful and important.

I'm a little surprised that the king and queen aren't actually sitting on the thrones. I didn't get to know them when they came to Katmere, but they totally seem the type to lord it over an entire room of their subjects. But this space is filled with people laughing, talking, eating from the fancy buffet laid out against the entire side wall, and nobody is being particularly obsequious.

At least not until the door closes behind us, and the hollow clap of the

locks snicking back into place echoes through the room. It seems like everyone in the hall turns as one to stare at us, even before the guard surrounds us and forces us to accompany them to the front of the room as they march in a *very* complicated formation.

A man in a fancy military jacket over dark slacks steps forward and announces to the room, “King Linden Choi and Queen Imogen Choi.”

Only when we are all in front of the thrones do the king and queen appear, walking out of the crowd with their dark-purple velvet robes swirling around them. The king is wearing his dark hair buzzcut short, his doublet a little tighter than the last time I saw him at Katmere, the dark vest stretching taut beneath the violet cape. The queen towers over her mate, her strawberry-blond hair flowing in waves above her diamond-studded lavender dress that shimmers with her every movement.

Each of them is also wearing a crown, and as they settle themselves on their thrones—the king on the left, queen on the right—the entire guard drops down into bows so low that they’re practically kissing the floor.

What surprises me even more, though, is that my friends do the same thing. Macy, Eden, Dawud, Jaxon, Hudson, and the members of the Order all bow down in front of the witch king and queen. Seconds later, the rest of the room follows suit, so that the only person who is currently standing straight up is...me.

I move to bow down, too, but Jaxon and Hudson reach out at the same moment, each of them latching on to one of my elbows to urge me to remain upright. That’s when it hits me. Of course they are bowing. Each of them is a prince in his own right but still lower station than the king or queen. No wonder Hudson and Jaxon seem so adamant that I don’t bow. I squeeze my fist, and the ring on my finger, and remind myself I am a queen as well.

The Crown tattoo on my hand itches a little at the reminder, and I shift uncomfortably.

Still, I remain standing. Better to meet the witch king and queen as equals, I suppose, than to meet them as some underling begging for I don’t know what. Help? Information? Sanctuary, as Macy claimed earlier?

They survey my lack of supplication in front of them, eyes half closed and lips twisted into annoyed scowls. I don’t know if they’re pissed that I refuse to bow or if they’re pissed that the whole group of us had the nerve to come here at all. Either way, I guess it doesn’t really matter. Not when the end result is the witch king and queen looking like they’ve spent the last hour sucking on a bunch of really sour lemons.

“You may rise.” The queen’s voice, light and melodic, rings through the Great Hall, and finally the bowing ends.

She waits until everyone in the room has done what she says before narrowing her focus on Macy, who shifts uncomfortably under the scrutiny even as she holds her queen’s gaze.

“Why did you come here?” the queen asks, though it sounds more like an accusation than a question.

“I didn’t know where else to go,” Macy answers, and her voice never wavers. She is shaking like a leaf, though, and I want nothing more than to step forward and offer her my support. But something tells me that doing so would be the wrong move this time, so I stand my ground and try not to glare daggers at the queen. “Katmere is—”

“We know exactly what happened at Katmere,” the queen snaps. “Just as we know that the lot of you are responsible for it.”

Macy swallows hard. “We had no choice but to destroy the school. Cyrus’s allies—”

“I’m not talking about that ridiculous temper tantrum the vampire princes just threw,” the queen snaps. “I’m speaking of the taking of our children. That never would have happened if—”

“If what?” Flint demands with a growl. “If we had let Cyrus murder us?”

“More like if we had just rolled over and let him own us,” Hudson interjects, “the way the Witch Court is letting him own them now.”

The king’s eyes narrow to slits at Hudson’s accusation. “Do you really think insulting us is the way to gain our help?”

“No,” Hudson answers with a negligent shrug. “But you’ve already decided that you won’t help us. All the rest of this is just for show.”

“There is nothing we can do for you here.” The queen’s words slice through the already tense air. “Valentina will escort you out.”

“You mean there’s nothing you *will* do for us,” Macy counters. “I just don’t understand why, when we are pleading for sanctuary,”

“You aren’t pleading for anything,” the king snaps. “You are demanding, and that is not your place.”

“I’m sorry.” Macy lowers her head in obvious supplication. “That’s not our intention at all—”

“It is precisely your intention,” the king tells her. “But your arrogance—and the arrogance of your friends—is not why we are denying your request.”

“We have already done all we can for you,” the queen says. “We should have

notified Cyrus the moment you tripped our alarms by portaling in here with your non-witch friends.”

“Cyrus?” I ask, so incredulous by her defense that the word flies out of my mouth before I register that I’m going to say it. “You’re working with Cyrus now?”

“We are not working with him!” The king’s voice rings throughout the Great Hall as his gaze finds Hudson’s. “But you know, better than most, what he has done.”

“You’re going to have to be a little more specific,” my mate drawls, flicking an imaginary speck off his shoulder. “Of late, my father has been a very bad boy.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Flint mutters under his breath.

“Do you think you’re the only ones worried about what happened at Katmere?” The king bites off each syllable like it tastes bad. “Do you think you’re the only ones frantic about the people he has taken? He has more than a hundred witch children from our Court and our most powerful covens. We must keep them safe until we can negotiate for their return.”

“And you think the way to keep them safe is to kick us out?” Macy asks, eyes wide and voice small.

“We cannot harbor you, nor can we provide any aid. As long as we do not do those two things, the vampire king assures me our children will be safe.” The queen swallows. “My daughter will be safe.”

And then I remember—the king and queen’s daughter was a freshman at Katmere this past year. Emma, I think her name is. Macy pointed her out in the halls once, but I’ve never actually met her.

Part of me understands why they’re being so unhelpful now. Of course, there’s another, bigger part of me that thinks they’re fools. They should know by now that trusting Cyrus—about anything—is a huge mistake. If he wants to hurt Emma, he’ll hurt her, and absolutely nothing will change his mind about doing so.

Apparently, I’m not the only one who thinks like that, because Hudson gives an incredulous—and insulting—laugh. “You can’t really believe that,” he snaps when they turn to look at him. “Your children aren’t safe now. I know my father, and he’s never kept an agreement in his life. He wouldn’t even know how.”

Macy lifts her chin and says, “He’s hurting them. He’s hurting the kids.”

The queen leans forward. “How would you know this?”

“Marise told us she overheard the wolves talking about needing the kids for their young magic, not for hostages.” Macy doesn’t mention Marise ended up betraying us, which makes me wonder if Macy doubts what she told us.

At this, the king and queen exchange a long glance, and I almost think they



might give in, might see that they can't trust Cyrus and need our help. But then the king turns back to us and shakes his head. "While it's true young magic is easier to steal, to consume, Cyrus has assured us that no harm will come to our children, and we see no reason to doubt him."

"See no reason?" Hudson rolls his eyes. "Have you not been paying attention? He *kidnapped your kids*. What in that action implies honesty?"

"And who is this Marise?" the queen asks, ignoring Hudson's comment, one haughty brow raised so high, it nearly reaches her hairline. "How do we even know *she* can be trusted?"

Macy starts to explain but barely gets out the first words, "She was our—" before the king slams his fist down on the edge of the arm of his throne.

"Enough! We will not listen to your lies anymore. You will leave this place immediately or face the consequences." His gaze narrows on Hudson and Jaxon. "And don't think we can't stop one of your tantrums from tearing down our Court."

Hudson snorts. "Yeah, I'd like to see you try."

"In kicking us out," Jaxon adds, "all you're doing is abandoning the one group of people who might actually be able to help save your daughter."

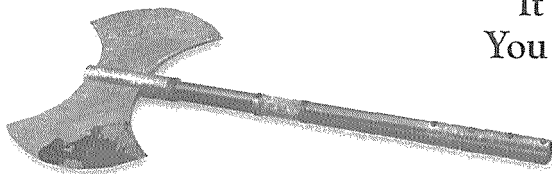
This time, it's the queen whose laugh is insulting. "You really think you have a chance against Cyrus and the coalition he's assembled? The eleven of you against his army of thousands?"

"If Cyrus himself didn't consider us a threat, then why is he going to such lengths to hunt us down, to stop anyone from helping us?"

Hudson makes a very good point. Why *is* Cyrus going to such extreme lengths for the eleven of us? For me?

I glance down at the Crown on the palm of my hand and think I might know the answer.

## 24

It's Not a Deal if  
You Don't Want It

“I have the Crown,” I announce, and the room stills as I hold my right hand up to show the king and queen the tattoo on the palm of my hand. They both rear back, staring at me with a look of both horror and fear, then lean as far away from my hand as they can while remaining on their thrones. Honestly, their reaction would be comical if I could see the humor in anything right now.

The king seems to catch himself, though, and sits taller, then reaches out and pats the queen’s hand. “Do not worry, my dear. The Crown is worthless without the Gargoyle Army.”

Now it’s my turn to rear back like I’ve been slapped. My grandfather hadn’t gotten around to telling me what the Crown was exactly *or* how to use it that day in the Gargoyle Court, but he definitely didn’t mention it was worthless without the Army.

*Thanks, Gramps.*

Regardless, I can’t help but wonder what the **Crown** does that the witch king and queen would be so afraid of it. I mean, we all already guessed it must be powerful, given the vampire king himself came to fight on the island to stop us from getting it. I’d begun to worry that it was me, that I wasn’t strong enough to wield it or worthy enough to bear it, and that’s why I sensed no change since the gargoyle **king transferred the tattoo to me.**

I sigh. I really need to stop underestimating myself. Beginning now.

With a blink, I flip my hand over. The ornate ring my grandfather gave me is now facing the king and queen, its giant emerald apparent for everyone to see. “Then I guess it’s a good thing I have that army, eh?”

I hold my breath, waiting for their reaction. And it comes swiftly as everyone in the Great Hall gasps, even Macy.

I haven’t had a chance to tell Hudson, or anyone, about my trip to the Gargoyle Court yet, let alone the ring or the Gargoyle Army or that I’m actually

related to the Unkillable Beast. But I'll have to catch them up later. This feels like our only chance to convince the witch king and queen to help. It's clear they fear what the Crown can do—with the Army, of course—and that's all the confirmation I need that this is the right move.

Hudson shuffles beside me, and I give him a quick look and mouth, *Later*, before turning back to the royals before me. We are going to need the help of the Witch Court, whether they want to give it or not, and that means convincing them I have the power to wield the Crown—whatever that means and whatever it can do.

"It can't be," the queen whispers. "The Gargoyle Army disappeared more than a thousand years ago."

"Who gave you that ring, young lady?" the king demands, his subjects now crowding around us for a look at what has everyone freaking out. "You stole it," he declares.

I bristle. "I most certainly did not steal this ring. My grandfather gave it to me." I pause, noticing for the first time the eerie quiet in the hall as everyone hangs on my next words. And I decide two can play to an audience as I narrow my eyes and state, "You know, the gargoyle king?"

Pandemonium breaks out as everyone whisper-shouts to one another. "The gargoyle king is alive?" "The Army is alive?" "She's in charge of everything?" And my personal favorite, "This girl is supposed to lead an army against Cyrus?"

The witch king glances over the crowd of people, listening to them question their future, *my* future, then assesses me. "You think you can lead this army against Cyrus? Get our children back?"

No. Absolutely not. But if that's what it's going to take, I'm damn sure going to try.

I take a deep breath and say, "Of course." I shoot a quick glance at Hudson, who nods, urging me to go on. "But I'll need your help."

The queen shakes her head. "The rules have not changed. No matter whose ring you wear. We cannot help you as long as the vampire king has our children held hostage."

And with that, my shoulders sag, my hand with the ring falling to my side.

But Hudson isn't so easily defeated. "So you're saying if we can rescue your kids from Cyrus's clutches, the Witch Court will agree to help us defeat Cyrus?"

"Now, I didn't—" the king starts to say, but his wife interrupts him.

"Yes." And her tone is final. "If our kids are safe, I pledge the Witch Court to your cause."

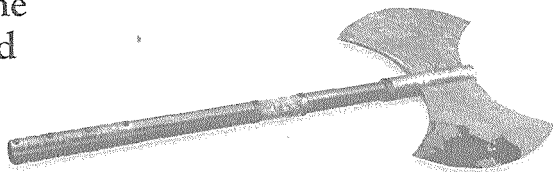
Before she changes her mind, I quickly reply, "Deal." And the hundreds of candles lining the walls of the Great Hall burn a brilliant blue for several seconds, the whole hue of the room shifting to blue tones, before the color flickers out and the candle's flames return to their normal orange-yellow.

"A deal has been struck," the queen states. "Now leave."

Guards suddenly swarm us from every angle and usher us out the door of the Great Hall, shoving us into a large anteroom to the left of the main doors. As far as dismissals go, I guess this one could have been worse. I mean, at least we're all still standing and even a little hopeful the Witch Court might end up helping us in a war against Cyrus.

That thought lasts until Valentina waves a hand, and Macy and the rest of my friends vanish into thin air.

## No GPS for the Not-So-Wicked



“**W**hat did you do?” I demand as horrible thoughts crowd my brain. “Where are they? What did you do to my friends?”

“I forgot gargoyles are immune to magic.” She sighs heavily, then waves a hand toward a guard. “Do something with her, will you, please?”

“With pleasure.” The guard’s eyes gleam with dislike as he makes a grab for me.

I consider avoiding him, consider reaching for the platinum string deep inside me so I can fight him off, but in the end, I don’t do anything. I don’t want to be here without my friends any more than they want me here. Besides, with any luck, he’ll take me to wherever they are, and we can work out what to do next. And where to go.

We need to find a way to rescue the kids, but we need a really good plan before we try to attack Cyrus in his own Court. Otherwise, we’ll end up trapped with everyone else...or worse.

Which is why I don’t fight the guard when he grabs on to my arm or when he starts marching me out the door in front of him. Valentina laughs a little at my lack of fight, but I ignore her. The last thing I want is for her to decide to throw me in a dungeon somewhere just for kicks.

In the end, she allows the guard to march me back through the long hallway with the wall carvings and the paintings, then down a flight of stairs. We don’t stop walking until we get to the side doors out of the Witch Court, which swing open with a wave of Valentina’s wand.

“Good luck out there,” she tells me, and for the first time, she doesn’t sound mean or sarcastic. In fact, I can’t help but think she sounds sincere—even as she ushers me straight through the solid-gold doors, through the black candle-lined courtyard, and out the wrought-iron gate onto the rough cobblestone street beyond.

Except I'm not really on a street, I realize as I look around. Dusk is setting in, so it's harder to see than it might be during the day, but it's still light enough that I can get a basic idea of where I am.

I'm obviously in an urban area, because wherever I am looks a lot like some kind of city square, and the street signs aren't in English. Plus it was morning when we left Katmere, so obviously I'm in a foreign country at least partway around the world.

I pull my phone out of my backpack and take a quick video of the area, turning 360 degrees as I do. Then I send it to my friends on our group chat along with a text that reads:

**Me:** Where am I?

And another one that reads:

**Me:** Where are you?

I stay put, wanting to be in the same spot where I took the video if they come looking for me. As I wait, I glance around, trying to get a better idea of what city—or at least what country—I'm in. I start by taking a photo of the closest sign and then blowing it up until I can actually read the words.

Il Piazza Castello.

Huh. So the Witch Court is in Italy. It's not what I expected, which honestly makes me feel kind of silly. I mean, how could I have roomed with Macy for this many months and not have asked her where the Witch Court is? And how could she have never mentioned it?

I shoot off another text to my friends, letting them know where I am, then take stock of the area. "Piazza" means "plaza" or "square" in Italian, if I'm not mistaken, and looking around at this place, I understand how it got its name. The whole area is a rectangle, with dead-end stone streets forming a kind of border around a large, rectangular patch of grass.

The streets are lined with beautiful white buildings with a distinct Italian flair, and the number of street signs implies that it can be a very busy area. At this time of night, though, it's completely empty. Like, so empty that to the best of my knowledge, I am the only person in the entire piazza—which feels eerie as fuck, to be honest.

Just as quickly as I think to myself that I do not want to be on this street alone, Hudson fades to directly in front of me, pulling me into his arms.

"Hey there," he says, running his hands along my arms. "You okay?"

I offer up a half smile. "Sorry about that. Valentina forgot magic doesn't work on gargoyles." I glance over his shoulder at the still-empty piazza. "Where

is everyone?"

"We split up. I got here first."

He shrugs like this is obvious. And I suppose it is, because he always finds me.

"That was some bomb you dropped in there." He's grinning now as he lets me go. "Loved every minute of it. Especially when the witch queen almost fell off her throne trying to get away from the Crown."

I shake my head and chuckle. "Yeah, that was odd. Of course, it doesn't help me figure out what the Crown actually *does*."

"True. But we know it terrifies powerful creatures. And likely is why Cyrus is hunting you down. He wants the Crown."

I shiver, and he pulls me into his arms again. It's as natural as breathing to snake my arms around his waist, rest my head on his chest, let the even beats of his heart sync with mine. I don't know how long we stand like this, but I'm grateful that Hudson isn't asking questions, even though I know he must have a dozen. Or a million. The biggest likely being how we've been together almost every waking—and sleeping—minute and yet I managed to discover not only that the gargoyle king is my grandfather, of some generation, and that the Gargoyle Army is alive, but I've also managed to get the ring that means I'm now leading them.

But he doesn't ask anything, just holds me, listening to me breathe and reassuring me with his warmth that no matter what, I'm not alone.

Eventually, I lean back to look up at him, and he just raises one brow and says, "So the Unkillable Beast is the gargoyle king, eh?"

Of course Hudson would figure it out. I nod.

"And **you're a direct descendant, somewhere down the line.**" This last is a statement, not a question.

Again, I nod.

"And he gave you **the ring to lead your people.**"

This time when I nod, I can't help holding my breath, waiting for his reaction.

He smiles down at me, pushing a few strands of hair behind my ear, before saying, "Well, that was smart. He's not in any condition to lead anyone to the bathroom, much less to war."

And I can't help it. I crack up laughing.

"What's so funny?" Jaxon asks as the Order and the rest of my friends skid to a stop around us.

They must have finally caught up while I was anxiously focused on my mate's response to learning I was now in charge of a mythical army. But just because

I told Hudson doesn't mean I want to discuss it with the rest of the group yet.

Instead, I try to deflect any questions by teasing Hudson. "Oh, I just discovered the promise Hudson made me with my promise ring is to paint my toenails every night for the rest of our lives."

Everyone laughs as Hudson plays along and rolls his eyes with a grin. "You wish."

"We all do, my friend." Mekhi slaps him on the shoulder. "I'd pay good money to see that. And post it. Everywhere."

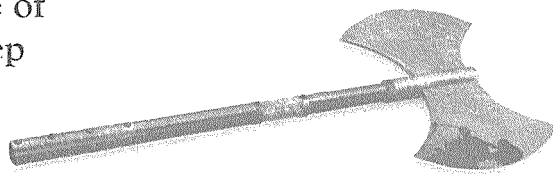
"Hey, I'm comfortable with my masculinity. I'm happy to paint anyone's toenails, including my own." He turns to Flint. "Well, except your talons." Turns to Jaxon. "And your toes." Turns to the entire Order. "Okay, none of yours, except maybe Byron's. He looks like he puts a fair bit of time into cuticle care."

And with that, everyone busts out laughing, and I love this guy so much, my heart feels near to bursting. I know what he's doing, and it means the world to me. He knows everyone has questions, but he's giving me a chance to tell them what's going on, what happened with the gargoyle king, in my own time. Which is not now.

Because right now, a very familiar witch is heading straight for us.



## A Long Game of Hide-and-Weep



“**V**iola.” Macy’s voice trembles as we turn as one to find the witch in the gorgeous purple robes who was responsible for us getting our so-called audience in front of the queen. “What are you doing out here?”

“I felt all the commotion and decided to come investigate. Imagine my surprise and consternation when I realized my dear sister had set a child down in the middle of Il Piazza Castello without an ounce of light or direction.” She waves a hand, and the entire square is illuminated by a bright, otherworldly light.

“Some of us were doing just fine in the dark,” Liam grinds out, clearly done with all witches in general.

Macy glances at him nervously before rushing in. “Well, I’m not a fan of the shadows, so thank you, Viola.”

“It was no trouble at all,” Viola answers. “But there are a few witches especially good at dispelling shadows, my dear, and you happen to be one of them.”

“What does that mean?” I demand at the same time Macy asks, “I am?”

Viola tilts her head to the side as she studies Macy. She looks contemplative, like she’s trying to decide what or how much to say. But that doesn’t make sense, considering she’s the one who came to us. Shouldn’t she already know what she wants to say?

The others must be as anxious for her to speak as I am, because none of them says a word until, finally, Viola speaks. “I only know of one witch who can send even the fiercest shadowdweller running in fear, and I think you might need her before your journey is over.”

“Why is that?” Byron asks. “And how do we find her?”

“She’s not lost—you don’t have to find her. She’s at the Vampire Court. As for who she is...” She turns to Macy. “I thought you would have figured that out by now.”

“What do you mean?” Macy asks, confused. “I don’t know anyone who deals in shadow magic.”

“Of course you do, darling. Your mother is a wiz at it.”

Her words hang in the air like a lit firework in the moments before it explodes—powerful, incendiary, irrevocable.

“My mother?” Macy whispers as color drains from her cheeks. “My mother is gone. She’s been gone for years. No one knows where she is.”

“That’s not precisely true.” Viola sighs. “I didn’t want to be the one to have to tell you this, but...she’s in the same place she’s been for eight years. At the Vampire Court, serving Cyrus.”

If possible, Macy loses even more color. “That’s not true.” Her voice is flat, her eyes frantic. “My mother wouldn’t do that. She *couldn’t* do that. Not Cyrus. My mom may have left us, she may have disappeared off the face of the earth, but she and my father have always despised Cyrus. She would never work for him.”

Viola gives a little shrug in an *I guess we’ll see who’s right* kind of way. “Remember, my child. In Cyrus’s world, things are very rarely what he says they are. And never what they appear to be.”

“You’re defending him?” Macy’s voice cracks with indignation.

“I would never defend that animal,” Viola snaps, and this time there is real anger on her face. “And make no mistake about it—if he touches one hair on our children’s heads, he will suffer in a way that makes the gates to Hell look like a child’s playground.”

“Then who—”

“I’m defending your mother. It’s a dangerous world out there, and sometimes the most unsavory of alliances must be made if one has any hope of survival. And sometimes, you have to do things like that regardless of choice.”

“You always have a choice,” Dawud says, shoving their fists deep into the pockets of their jeans.

“Maybe.” Viola looks down her long, slender nose at the werewolf. “But sometimes there are no good choices—only the choice that won’t get you or the people you care about dead. Anyone who thinks otherwise is a child.”

Macy goes quiet after that—not quiet like she’s run out of things to say, but quiet like she doesn’t know *what* to say. Or what to feel. It’s going to take more than five minutes for her to absorb the news that her mother is alive and living in the Vampire Court, let alone everything else we’ve been talking about.

A thought occurs to me. It was clear in the Witch Court that the king and queen knew exactly what the Crown could do. “Viola, can I ask you a question?”

The older witch pierces me with her violet eyes, one eyebrow raised. “You can ask, certainly, although I’m not sure I can guarantee an answer.”

“Fair enough.” I nod, then take a deep breath, wrap my shaking hands around my waist. I’m not sure why I’m so afraid to ask, but I finally lift my chin. “Do you know what the Crown does? Why the king and queen—and Cyrus—are so afraid of it?”

Viola’s eyes go wide, as though she thought I would ask any question but that one. “No one told you when they gave it to you?”

I shake my head.

“Well, that’s...unusual.” She pauses, seeming to weigh whether to tell me or not, but then she must decide I need to know because she leans forward like she’s sharing a secret. “Gargoyles were the law and order of the paranormal world for a thousand years. The Gargoyle Army would surround those who committed egregious crimes against another—and the gargoyle king would lay the Crown on their chest and decide their punishment.”

And now it’s my turn to be surprised someone said the exact opposite thing I was expecting. “Well, that doesn’t seem a helpful power in a war.” I can’t help the bitterness and disappointment from coloring my words. “I thought the Crown was supposed to give the wearer infinite power. Isn’t that why Cyrus wants it?”

But Viola makes a *tsking* sound. “You don’t understand, child. The person who wields the Crown can take away a paranormal’s powers, some or all of them if they choose. For a day. A week. Forever. Whatever befits the crime the Gargoyle Army has found them guilty of. With just a touch of your hand. Do you not think the ability to render any enemy powerless to be ‘infinite power’?”

“Holy hell,” Flint says, then whistles long and hard. And takes two steps away from me. Everyone does, actually. Except Hudson.

My stomach churns at the idea of removing anyone’s powers. I whisper on a ragged breath, “I know what it’s like to not have my gargoyle, from my time in prison, and I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. I don’t—” My voice breaks, and I have to try again. “I don’t want this Crown. How do I get rid of it?”

But Viola just stares at me, and something like admiration slowly sharpens her gaze. Her eyes flick to my feet and back up again before she says, “I imagine a lot of people underestimate you, don’t they, Grace? That’s good. They’ll never see you coming.”

Okay, well, I guess that’s a compliment? “I don’t need the Crown for that. Do you know how I can get rid of it?”

“The only way to pass the Crown is to abdicate the throne to another gargoyle

in the royal line,” she says, and each word feels like the swing of a hammer against my battered soul. I like to think I understand what Hudson goes through, the choices he has to make about others’ fates and how he agonizes over making the wrong ones, but I don’t think I truly understood until this moment. Until I literally held the power in the palm of my hand to strip someone of their basic right to *be* who they were meant to be. To continue their lives as they choose. Could I give that burden to someone else to carry so easily?

But I haven’t even used this power yet, and I want it gone, this tattoo off my hand now. I’m fighting the urge to claw at my palm when Hudson reaches down and takes my hand in his, pulls me against him. “It’s going to be okay,” he whispers in my hair, and I try to believe him.

Viola continues. “Are you saying, if you had the chance to strip Cyrus of his powers for the crimes he’s committed, you wouldn’t do it?”

I shake my head. Because no, I wouldn’t. Or at least, I don’t think I would. “I would have to believe, without a shadow of a doubt, that he would never stop harming others, killing others, but even then, I think it would be very hard to do.”

“And this is why you hold the Crown, Grace. A decision such as this should never be easy. But sometimes, there is no other way.”

Thinking of what Cyrus is capable of, it’s hard not to believe her, not to realize I have no choice but to see this through for now rather than give up what may be our only chance at stopping him before he hurts more people. I’m just about to agree with her when her mouth turns down as she admits, “Of course, the question is moot because, as the king said, the Crown does not work without the Gargoyle Army. Something Cyrus must think he’s found a way around, if what you say about him wanting the Crown is true.”

“So what do we do now?” Byron queries.

He’s asking the rest of us—and specifically Jaxon—but Viola is the one who answers. “Now?” She lifts a brow. “Now you get as far from the Witch Court as you possibly can.”

“I definitely think that’s our plan,” Macy agrees. “But we don’t know where to go if we can’t stay—”

“Why?” Hudson’s voice burns with urgency. “What haven’t we figured out?”

Viola studies him, her eyes searching his face like she’s looking for something, though I don’t know what it could be. She must find it, though, because she answers, “If I know my sister, you’ve got about ten more minutes before all hell breaks loose.”

“You think she’s going to turn us in?” Now Jaxon is all urgency, his eyes

darting around the piazza as he waits for her answer.

"I think Imogen feels like she doesn't have a choice." Her voice is deliberately bland as she repeats the words—or at least the sentiment—that she and Dawud just disagreed on. "In fact, I think a lot of us feel that way right now. Including you."

"That doesn't mean we shouldn't try to find a better choice," Flint tells her. "Just going along because we're scared of what might happen isn't an answer. Or, at least, it's not a good answer."

This time, when Viola lifts a brow, there's respect in her eyes. Along with something else. My gut tells me it's that something else that has her bending down out of the blue and pressing a palm to Flint's injured leg.

"What are you—" He breaks off with a startled cry as another explosion of light comes from beneath her hand.

"Silence," she hisses, but it's an impossible demand when—seconds later—a smooth, polished prosthetic appears where the bottom half of Flint's leg used to be.

"Oh my God," Eden breathes. "How did you do that?"

Viola raises both brows, even as she looks down her nose at Eden—and the rest of us. "Magic, of course."

She turns back to Flint, who looks both shocked and overwhelmed as he gazes at his new prosthetic. "I don't— I can't— Thank y—"

"It should shift back and forth when you move." She deliberately cuts him off before he can thank her fully. "Obviously, it won't be as good as your leg, but it should work well enough to let you get rid of those things." She looks at his crutches with disdain.

"Why did you seek us out?" I ask, because no way did this woman come down here just to see what the "commotion" was about.

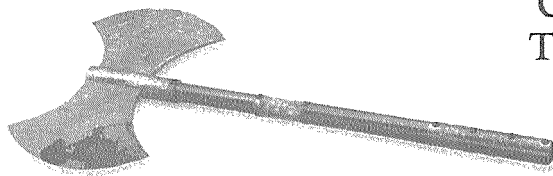
She gives me a measured gaze before replying. "Whatever you do, Grace, you cannot allow Cyrus to capture you. Death would be better than what he has planned for you."

I gasp.

"And what is that exactly?" Hudson bites out.

"He's going to—" she begins to reply, then startles suddenly at a noise in the distance. Her eyes widen before she shouts, "Run! Now!" just as her light goes out and the piazza around us is plunged into total darkness.

## Country Roads Take Me Where?



For a second, I'm completely disoriented. But then Hudson pulls me against him, and we fade straight out of the plaza. I don't know why Viola told us to run—because the Witch Guard is coming or because Cyrus's troops have shown up to capture us. Maybe both.

Probably both.

Either way, I'm all for getting out of this dark and twisted piazza and taking all my friends with me. I glance behind me to make sure they're with us, and they are. The Order is together, with Macy holding on to Byron for dear life as they fade through the streets. Dawud is right behind them, and lagging a little behind are Eden and Flint, whose new prosthetic is working almost as well as his old leg. There's a slight hesitation every few steps, but it isn't slowing him down.

It's pretty obvious that he and Eden want to shift into their dragon forms, but it's just as obvious that they are waiting until we're in a place where two dragons flying overhead won't make a million views on YouTube. Too bad we don't have a clue where that less crowded place is.

And so we keep running, putting as much distance between the Witch Court and ourselves as we can manage. Eventually, the densely populated city streets crowded with buildings and fountains and parked cars give way to more greenery, less houses. But it's not until it finally seems like we've left the city behind and are heading straight into the Alps that stand over the city like snow-capped sentries that we finally pause to take a breath.

"Thank God!" Eden says, falling face-first into the grass the second we stop. She's drenched in sweat, her clothes sticking to her body as she pulls in long, shuddering breaths.

Flint—whose prosthetic held up incredibly well—follows her down, as does Dawud, though they fall on their back rather than flopping flat onto their face. All three look like they've been ridden hard and put away wet.

As opposed to the vampires, none of whom seem any worse for wear. Yeah, the Order is a little winded, but that's about it, while Jaxon and Hudson look like they've been out for a midnight stroll. Big shock. I'm doing fine and so is Macy, but that's because Hudson and Byron carried us the entire way. Otherwise, I'm pretty sure we'd still be several miles back.

"So," Flint says when he finally catches his breath. "What do we do now?"

"Lay here and wait for death," Eden answers with a groan. The words are muffled, as her face is still planted firmly in the ground beneath her.

Dawud sits up, rolling their eyes. "Charming as that sounds, my vote is for raiding the Vampire Court."

"It's not safe," Rafael answers.

"It's never going to be safe," they shoot back. "And the longer we wait, the more time he has to fortify himself inside that damn fortress."

"He's already fortified himself," Hudson says. "He's always been hypervigilant when it comes to security, and nothing about this situation will change that. Rushing in there like lambs to the slaughter isn't going to save your brother. Or anyone else."

"Neither will running around the globe begging for help from people who won't give it," Eden counters.

"You're right about that," Jaxon agrees. "But that doesn't mean we just attack Cyrus and to hell with the consequences."

"Too much is riding on getting into the Vampire Court to just rush in without a plan," I tell Dawud. "We need to take a few days and figure out the best way to infiltrate without getting caught, and then I'll be the first one in line to help you tear the damn thing down brick by brick."

"My brother may not have a few days," they object.

"I agree. Our family is in there, our friends, and who knows for how much longer." Macy's voice is rough, strained.

Mekhi shakes his head. "I'm with Grace. We need a foolproof plan or we're just going to end up locked away with the others—and there won't be anyone left to rescue us."

"So what do we do?" Byron asks as he sinks down onto the ground beside Flint. "I mean, where do we even go to make this plan? Katmere is gone. The Witch Court won't take us—"

Flint rolls onto his side and props his head in his hand. "The dragons are in total disarray."

"Our families are probably being watched." Liam settles down on the ground

between Byron and Dawud.

"They're definitely being watched," Hudson agrees. "And even if they aren't—"

"They are," Macy interrupts.

"They are," Jaxon affirms. "But if they weren't, do we really want to risk getting them involved? Cyrus isn't exactly known for his restraint when it comes to people who get in the way of what he wants."

"Is that what they call being a psychopath these days?" Hudson's voice is amused, though his eyes are anything but. "A lack of restraint?"

"Takes one to know one," Flint accuses, and Hudson goes stiff, his jaw working as he looks into the distance.

"Seriously?" I tell Flint, fighting the urge to punch him right in his big, fat mouth. I get that he's still pissed off at Hudson—and that he might always be—and pissed that Hudson was willing to use his gifts to save me but, to Flint, not to save Luca. But now is not the time for us to take potshots at each other. And especially not at my mate, who gave us a chance to escape Katmere to begin with...and has been tormenting himself ever since.

"It's fine—" Hudson starts.

"No, it's not!" I tell him. "We're all each other has. This group is made up of the only people in the world we can actually count on, and the last thing we need is to be swiping at one another."

"She's right. You're better than this," Jaxon says and holds Flint's gaze for so long, it makes me squirm.

Flint lets out a long-suffering sigh and says, "I'll try not to be a dick. No promises, though."

"Which means he'll definitely still be a dick," Liam says with a grin.

"Look who's talking," Rafael counters with a friendly shoulder bump, to which Liam gives a little *touché* tilt of his head that makes everyone laugh.

It loosens the tension just enough that I *almost* let go of my anger. But knowing that Flint still hasn't forgiven Hudson keeps me from getting all the way there.

"What about the Bloodletter?" Eden suggests once the boys quiet down again. "She has an entire ice cave to herself. Surely we could take a breather and figure out our next steps there."

"No." The answer comes from deep inside me as my entire being recoils at just the thought of seeing her again. "We can't go back to her."

"Why not?" Jaxon asks. "It's not actually that bad of an idea."



"It's a horrible idea. That woman—" I break off, reminding myself that I never told Jaxon about what she did to him. To us. And now, in front of everyone, is definitely not the time to spill the beans.

I finally settle on saying, "I don't trust her. She's never once told us everything we needed to know. I don't think we need any more wild goose chases or half-truths."

"You can say that again," Macy agrees. She looks sadder and more lost than I have ever seen her—even after Xavier died. Not that I blame her. Finding out that her mother left her to go to the Vampire Court and work with Cyrus...there are no words. Especially not since her father is currently being held against his will in that very Vampire Court.

I give her a hug, and at first, she resists. I persist, though—if anyone in the world ever needed comfort right now, it's my cousin—and eventually she hugs me back.

The others talk quietly among themselves, throwing out ideas of where we can go. Eden keeps glancing at us, clearly upset Macy is upset, but I give her a thumbs-up behind Macy's back that I've got her covered. She nods and turns back to the group, adding another suggestion of a possible refuge for us.

No one hits on anything that's really going to work, though, and an idea begins growing in the back of my mind. It's absurd, utterly bizarre, and fantastical, which is why it just might work.

Eventually, Macy pulls away. "Sorry," she whispers as she searches her backpack for something to wipe her face.

I pull a small pack of tissues out of the front pocket of my backpack and hand a couple to her. "Don't apologize. You've had a lot thrown at you in the last twenty-four hours."

"We all have," she says.

"Yeah, but this isn't a contest. And honestly, if it were, I'm pretty sure you'd win. At least the rest of us know where our parents are."

"We do," Hudson agrees, dropping down behind us. "More's the pity."

Macy's laugh is a little bit teary, but it's still a laugh. "I can see how knowing where Cyrus is could be a bummer."

"Not as big a bummer as *not* knowing where he is," Hudson counters.

"True that," Flint chimes in as he scoots over, wraps an arm around Macy's shoulder, and squeezes tight.

Soon, all the others are stretched out on the grass around us. They look as exhausted as I feel. Then again, it's been a chaotic couple of days. Any one

of the things that happened seems unimaginable. Add them all together and it feels like the end of the damn world.

Or maybe that's already happened, and we just don't know it yet.

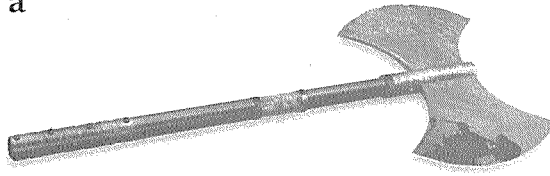
It's a lot to think about when we're in the middle of the Italian countryside with nowhere to go. Reaching into my backpack, I pull out the box of Pop-Tarts and pass it around to all the non-vampires in the group, then follow it with the two bottles of water I shoved in there at the last minute.

Everyone takes a couple of sips, and somehow that—along with a cherry Pop-Tart—makes everything feel not quite so unmanageable. Like maybe we actually have a shot here.

A shot is all we've ever had, and somehow we've made it work. Maybe, just maybe, this time won't be any different.

It's that hope that spurs me to share the thought that's been growing in the back of my mind since the Witch Court. "I have an idea."

## Irish Luck Be a Lady Tonight



**I**t takes a second for my words to get through, and I wait patiently for everyone to stop talking and turn to me.

“What is it?” Jaxon asks after everyone grows quiet.

I take a deep breath as I try to figure out the best way to explain what happened with Alistair and the Gargoyle Court. In the end, I decide to start by showing them the same thing that convinced me—the emerald ring I’m still wearing on my right ring finger.

“I got this at the Gargoyle Court,” I tell them, turning on my phone’s flashlight so they can see the gleam of the stone in the darkness as I quickly fill them in on everything that happened.

I finish with, “I thought maybe I’d hallucinated the whole thing, but I still have this, the ring that Alistair gave me and Chastain kissed...so it has to have actually happened, right?”

“Of course it happened.” Hudson reaches for my hand and kisses both the ring and the back of my hand. It makes me melt a little, both his easy acceptance of something that seems impossible just because I say it’s true *and* his easy acceptance of something that even I am having a hard time accepting. Me as the gargoyle queen.

I mean, it’s one thing to be queen when I have no subjects. It’s another thing altogether to rule thousands of gargoyles all over the world. A big part of me wants to run as far and as fast as I can from the responsibility.

It’s so strange to me the way Cyrus is willing to do anything for more power when all I want to do is give up the power that I’ve got. I’m eighteen years old and until seven months ago didn’t know this world existed. How on earth can I be expected to rule in it?

The Crown on my palm itches a little, reminding me that giving up power or anything else isn’t an option for me. Not when Cyrus is hell-bent on destroying

anyone and everyone who doesn't bow to him.

"Where *is* the Gargoyle Court?" Rafael asks.

"Ireland," Dawud and I say at exactly the same moment.

I turn to them with lifted brows, and they shrug a little. "Or at least, that's what the stories handed down in my pack always say, though not exactly where in Ireland."

"Your pack has stories about gargoyles?" I ask.

"*Everyone* has stories about gargoyles," Eden tells me. "We just didn't know any of them were true until you."

"So you think we should go to Ireland?" Byron asks, watching me closely.

"I think it's our best option at this point. The Gargoyle Court is in Cork, in a massive castle on a cliff overlooking the ocean. Isolated and well-protected. It will give us a place to get some rest and work through our next steps." I pause and blow out a long breath before saying the part of the plan I hate. "And it gives us a chance to rally the Gargoyle Army. Or at least the part of it that's at the Court. There weren't that many, but adding a few dozen people to our ranks who can do what I can do... It can't be a bad thing, right?"

"Not a bad thing at all," Macy says, grinning. "Do you think they can all grow as big as you did at the end of the Ludares battle or the Unkillable Beast did on the island?"

"That would be sweet," Liam says. "You could just stomp the Vampire Court to dust."

"And my asshole father with it," Jaxon says in a disgusted voice.

"Sounds good to me," Dawud adds. "As long as we get my brother out first, I say obliterate the whole damn place."

"I don't know if other gargoyles can do that," I say. "I mean, if I can, they should be able to, right?"

I turn to Hudson for reassurance, but he's just watching me with a contemplative look on his face.

"What's wrong?" I ask softly as our friends continue to talk about how cool it would be if the gargoyles could just crush the Vampire Court like giants dancing at a rave.

"Nothing's wrong," he answers. "I just don't think the growing thing you did at Ludares was a gargoyle power."

Shock ripples through me. "What do you mean? The Unkillable Beast—Alistair—was also huge."

"He was huge because he'd been using stone to repair himself for centuries.

Your power is totally different. Don't forget I lived inside your mind for, well, a very long time." He winks at me. "I became very *intimate* with what makes you tick."

Normally, a comment like that would make me blush, pull me out of my own head, but honestly, this time, the effort falls flat. My mind is swirling with thoughts of what Alistair said about my grandmother...and her penchant for biting. What if I am part monster? Something horrific and scary and huge? Unease slithers along my spine, but I tell myself it's no big deal. If Hudson was worried about it, he would have said something long ago. My mate is nothing if not proactive, even when I don't want him to be.

"So what do you think it is?" I finally get the nerve to ask.

At the same time, Eden says, "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm ready to get out of this field."

"More than ready," Dawud says as they sift their fingers through the grass. Did they drop something? They must find whatever it was, because they quickly stuff something into their pocket, then look at Macy. "Are you going to do your thing?" They wave an arm in a swirly motion.

"I can't." Macy sighs. "I've never been to Cork."

Dawud looks surprised. "Witches can't open portals to places they've never been?"

Macy looks just as surprised. "Um, no. We have magic, but we're not *gods*. What do they teach you in that wolf pack of yours anyway?"

"Apparently not enough." They look around. "So how are we going to get there, then?"

"They really don't teach you much, do they?" Eden teases as she pulls up Google Maps on her phone and holds it out for the rest of us to see. "It looks like our best bet is a straight shot northwest from here. We'll hit the Atlantic eventually, but we can keep low."

"Keep low?" Dawud asks, even as their eyes go wide.

"Only one way to get there from here," Flint says with a grin that almost reaches his eyes. "We fly, baby."

The air around him shimmers, and seconds later, he's in his dragon form—complete with a dragon foot and claw prosthetic.

"Holy shit, it worked!" Byron exclaims, bending down to get a look at Flint's magic foot.

Thank God. I don't know what Viola did or why she helped us, but I will forever be grateful that she did.

As the others are oohing and aahing over Flint's new prosthetic, I turn back to Hudson. "What were you going to say? About my powers?"

He goes to answer but at the last second shakes his head. "It's not a big deal," he says, then smirks. "No pun intended."

"It feels like a *big* deal," I shoot back, adding air quotes around "big," and there's a part of me that wants to press him for an answer. But honestly, I've got enough on my plate right now worrying about what I'm going to say to the gargoyles at the Gargoyle Court. Worrying about some nebulous other power that I might possibly have—if Hudson is even right—is going to have to wait. For tonight, at least, I'm totally resurrecting my Shit I Don't Need to Deal With Today file and shoving this question inside.

"Uh, you want us to fly?" Dawud's eyes are huge as they take several steps away from Flint. "Like, on your back?"

"It's not bad at all," Macy says as Byron gives her a huge boost onto Flint's back. She holds a hand out to Dawud. "Come on. Byron and I will help you up."

Dawud still looks skeptical.

"It's pretty much your only option at this point, so just do it and don't think about it," Liam tells them. "Unless you can run on water."

Dawud scowls at him, but in the end, they let Byron lift them up. Macy grabs their hand and pulls them the last little way onto Flint, and Dawud settles in with a grateful look. At least until Flint moves beneath them. Then they let loose with a shout so loud, it rings through the countryside.

It only stops because they slap a hand over their mouth in horror while the rest of us laugh.

Flint's dragon snorts his own laughter out, and then—because he's Flint—he does a little dance to freak Dawud out even more. Flint's totally hoping they'll scream again, but apparently their jaw is locked shut, because this time, Dawud doesn't make a sound. They do close their eyes and take several deep breaths, but that seems fair. I remember doing the same thing when Flint invited me to fly with him the very first time.

"You going to fly?" Hudson asks me, holding my hand even as he steps toward Eden, who is just completing her shift.

"Damn straight," I tell him with a grin. "But don't worry. I'll catch you if you fall."

I expect him to laugh, but instead his eyes are completely serious when he answers, "Ditto."

He turns away before I can ask him what he means, querying Eden for her

permission to climb on. Her dragon nods, and he jumps lightly onto her back, followed quickly by Rafael and Liam, both of whom look as freaked out as Dawud. Of the Order, only Byron seems comfortable being on a dragon's back.

It makes me feel a little bad for them and for the stupid unwritten rules Katmere had against the different paranormals mingling. Hudson, Jaxon, Macy, Flint, Eden, Mekhi, Xavier, Gwen, Luca—they've absolutely been the best part of this whole world for me, even better than finding out I'm a gargoyle. I can't imagine what my life would be like if we'd followed those ridiculous norms and stuck to our own groups.

Because it makes me sad to think about it, I blow Hudson a kiss. Then I look at Jaxon—who's planning on doing his telekinesis thing—and say, "Last one to Ireland has to dance like a chicken."

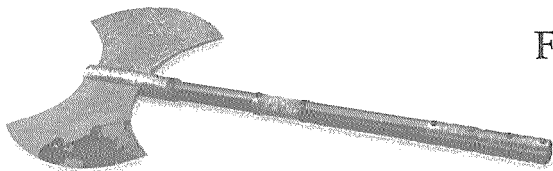
"So that's how it is, huh?" he asks.

"That's how it is," I say as I shift.

The second I've got my wings, I shoot straight into the air and take off, leaving a surprised Jaxon, Eden, and Flint to eat my dust.

And I try really, really hard not to worry the entire flight about what reception we'll get once our motley group of paranormals arrives at the Gargoyle Court.

## 29

Passed with  
Flying Dragons

Despite the way the flight started, it ends up being a very different ride than usual. No flips, no loop the loops, no sprints between Eden and Flint or Jaxon and me. There is only quiet contemplation as we fly over Europe and then the English Channel and into the Celtic Sea.

As we approach a distant island, I can feel the Court as clearly as my own heartbeat. It's like there's a string running between us that's slowly getting rolled up, pulling me closer with each crank of the wheel.

"We're almost there," I shout to the others right before I move to drop lower and lower.

I'm coasting right above the Celtic Sea now, the sunrise just barely painting the water a beautiful orange as the sun winks above the horizon and reminds me of early-morning beach runs in San Diego. For the first time, I wonder if my parents chose to run to California because it was on the water, too. The Pacific, not the Atlantic, but still the ocean. Still close to the water that is such an integral part of my powers.

A quick glance at my friends tells me that exhaustion is setting in for all of them. Flint is lagging a little behind, his wings spread out at his sides as he tries to coast on the wind currents as much as possible. Eden is still flapping her wings, but each rise and fall seems to be taking longer and longer. Even Hudson is slumping a little, like sheer will is the only thing holding him upright.

Ahead, I can see the rocky cliffs of Cork in the distance. Despite my own exhaustion, excitement thrums in my blood—a kind of primal drive that pushes me faster and faster until finally I can see it on the horizon.

The fancy iron fence that surrounds the Gargoyle Court and the stone castle that lies right inside the fence.

Nerves join the excitement as I wonder how they'll receive my friends and me. Will Chastain follow my directions or will he choose to remain loyal to Alistair



even after the gargoyle king very clearly passed the baton to me? Will the other gargoyles accept me, or will they ignore me? And what will I do if they choose not to listen to me? How will I fix it? More importantly, can it even be fixed?

The questions chase themselves around in my head, getting harder and more daunting the closer I get to the Gargoyle Court. Until suddenly, I'm right on top of it—or what should be it.

I land slowly, wondering if I've gotten it wrong. Wondering if the beacon that guided me here is defective. Wondering if, somehow, I really had imagined the hours I spent here with Alistair.

Because this place where I'm standing is nothing like the place I visited yesterday. The fancy iron fence is the same, but that's it.

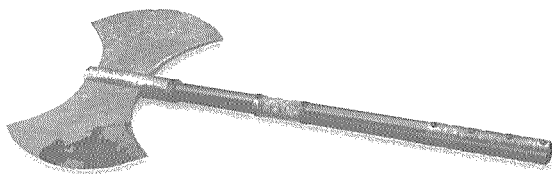
The courtyard I walked through? Gone.

The castle where I watched other gargoyles train? Nothing but piles of rock and random vines.

The other gargoyles themselves? Gone, as if they had never been.

This Gargoyle Court—*my* Gargoyle Court? A dream that just became my nightmare.

## 30

Talk About  
a Fixer-Upper

As soon as Eden hits the ground, Hudson is by my side. He doesn't say anything at first, and neither do I. Instead, we just stand there gazing at the destruction.

There is no courtyard left.

No foyer and grand hall.

No wide, round towers that reach from the ground up to the sky.

There's nothing left except a bunch of rubble and even more broken dreams. Which seems about right as I can feel my own ideas, my own hopes, shattering on the buckled ground at my feet.

"I've got to say, I'm not big on their aesthetic." The words are sarcastic, but Hudson's tone is soft—as is the look he gives me as he gently bumps his shoulder against my own.

"A little too *end of the world* for you?" I ask as I lean into him.

He rolls his eyes. "A little too *walls are so last century*."

"I do like a good wall," I tell him, and somehow I'm smiling when two minutes ago it felt like I'd never smile again.

"And here I thought four walls was the way to go." He pulls my back against his chest, his arms reaching around to hold me tight against him, and rests his chin on the top of my head.

"You always were an overachiever."

He feels good, really good, even in the face of all this destruction. So I lean against him and take a moment to breathe. Just breathe.

"You okay?" he asks after a few seconds.

"Not when you ask like that," I shoot back.

"Like what?"

"Like you expect me to break any second now. Or like I'm already broken." I pull away. "I didn't hallucinate an entire Gargoyle Court. It was here. It was right here."

"I have absolutely no doubt that it was," Hudson reassures me in a way that convinces me he really does believe me.

Still, I turn back to the rubble, wondering if there was a way Cyrus could have done this. Could he have beaten me here and torn the whole place down just to make sure we didn't have a safe haven of any sort? But if so, what happened to the gargoyles I saw training here yesterday? Are they buried under the rocks, trapped and waiting for me to find them?

The thought spurs me to action, has me moving through the dilapidated, rusted-out fence and into the area that was once a glorious courtyard overlooking the ocean. But it only takes a few seconds for logic to kick in—as well as my apparently less-than-keen observation skills.

This place didn't collapse recently. It's been like this for decades, maybe even centuries. Whole areas of rock have been overgrown with weeds and vines. The iron fence is rusted to hell and back. And scattered willy-nilly throughout the ruins are the bones of animals who came to investigate and ended up getting trapped in the debris.

No, this isn't Cyrus's fault. Or at least, it's not Cyrus's fault anytime in the last century. Before that, it's anyone's guess.

"I don't understand," I whisper as our other friends gather around. "It wasn't a dream. It wasn't."

I run my thumb over the emerald in my ring. It's as hard—and as real—as ever. "I didn't make this place up. I saw it so clearly." I walk over to the left of the courtyard, to a pile of large stones covered in ivy. "This was a tower—one of four. It had stained glass windows and squared-off battlements, and it was right here. *Right here.*"

"No one is doubting you, Grace," Macy says.

"*I'm* doubting me," I shoot back. "How could I not be?"

"No offense, but I'm doubting you, too," Dawud says with a shrug. "I mean, this seems more than a little"—they mime like I've been smoking something—"to me."

It feels like that's the worst thing they could have said when I'm already doubting myself, and I can feel my friends getting ready to lay into them for being so insensitive. But at the same time, it's also the *best* thing they could have said, because it makes me laugh, even in the face of whatever all this is.

"I don't know what's going on with me," I tell Dawud and the rest of my friends. "It seemed so real when Alistair brought me here."

"It probably was real," Jaxon answers. His smile is a little soft when he tells

me, “There are more things in heaven and hell, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

“You mean heaven and earth, don’t you?” I say, and now I’m grinning right back at him, because how can I not? Those were practically the first words he ever said to me—a warning and a promise, though I didn’t know it at the time.

“After the last few days?” he asks, brow raised. “I definitely mean heaven and hell. I’m pretty sure neither Shakespeare nor Hamlet ever lived through a few weeks like we’ve had.”

“You have a point there.” I make a face at him, relief a wild thing within me despite the mess we’re in.

A lot of truly horrible things have happened, but the fact that Jaxon is doing so well right now makes me happier than I can ever express. No one would know from looking at him that he died less than forty-eight hours ago.

He looks good, really good. Plus, for the first time in a long time, it feels good to be around him again. The uncomfortable tension between us has pretty much disappeared, and in its place is something else—something that feels like respect and appreciation and love.

Something that feels like more than friendship and less than romance.

Something that feels an awful lot like family.

He’s right that a lot of terrible things have happened, but the fact that Jaxon and I have ended up here, where we should have been all along, makes everything else feel not so bad. Add in the fact that Hudson and I finally have our shit sorted, too, at least I think we do, and I can’t help but be cautiously optimistic that things are going to be okay. Even if the rest of our lives—and our world—are in shambles.

“So what do we do now?” Eden asks. She’s sitting on top of a large pile of stones, and she looks beat, like she can barely keep her eyes open.

“I think we need to find a hotel,” I say. “Someplace out of the way where Cyrus and his followers won’t think to look for us. We need to sleep for a while, and then we might actually have a fighting chance. Or at least be able to convince ourselves that we do.”

“Already on it,” Hudson says, thumbs flying over his phone screen. “I found a house not that far from here through an app. I’ve rented several cottages for the next month just in case we need a base of operations for longer, and because they had no one on the property last night, the owner has agreed to let us check in now for a small fee.”

“An app? You mean like Airbnb?” I ask, astonished.

“Something like that,” he answers with a grin.

“I thought we had to book in advance and be, like, twenty-five or something to rent one of those places.”

“I’m two hundred years old and rich as fuck, Grace.” His tone is droll as he pulls a pair of sunglasses out of his jacket pocket and slides them on just as rays from the early-morning sun hit the edges of the courtyard. “Occasionally, it has its perks.”

It might be the most Hudson Vega thing he’s ever said—I mean, besides comparing Jaxon to the Goodyear Blimp—and I can’t help cracking up. “You’re ridiculous. You know that, right?”

His answering smirk says it all. “I’ve texted all of you but Dawud the address—sorry, I don’t know your number—and I’ll meet you there. But I’ve got to go.”

“Wait, why?” I grab hold of his arm as he moves to turn away, and his smirk grows more pronounced.

And then I get it, even before I register the way his eyes linger on the hollow of my throat. He drank from me in prison only forty-eight hours ago. I’m not sure how long drinking from a human makes a vampire hypersensitive to the sun, but clearly two days is not enough.

“Go!” I tell him, dropping his hand and giving him a little shove toward the fence.

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” he replies with a look that has me feeling all kinds of things I should be too exhausted to feel.

“I’ll take that as my cue as well,” Jaxon says and fades away. Which, not going to lie, surprises me more than a little.

Especially when I turn to make a comment to Flint and find him looking anywhere and everywhere but at me, the Order already fading after Jaxon. I open my mouth to say something to Flint—just to see how he’ll respond—but before I can, Eden holds up her phone.

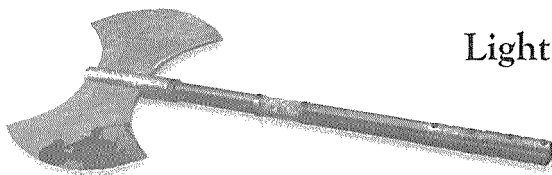
“I’ve mapped it out. You ready to go?”

“I was ready ten minutes ago,” Dawud answers, and they grin even as the air around them begins to sparkle.

Seconds later, we take to the sky, and while I’ve lost my chance to ask Flint what’s going on, I haven’t forgotten the look on his face as Jaxon faded away. Intense, angry, terrified.

I could be wrong, but something tells me the next few days are going to be more interesting than even I’d imagined.

## This Little Lighthouse of Mine



**I**t turns out Hudson didn't just rent us a house. He rented us a freaking compound—complete with an actual, working lighthouse.

“A lighthouse!”

Hudson grins. “Yes.”

“You rented us a lighthouse!”

“And the two houses right down the road that go with it,” he points out as he rests his shoulders—and one Dior Explorer-clad foot—against the wall.

He looks good like this—really good—but I'm not about to tell him that. Partly because his ego is big enough already and partly because, “You rented us a *lighthouse*.”

“I did.” He lifts one too-sexy brow. “Are you going to keep saying that?”

“Probably. And I'll probably be all heart-eyed while I do.”

“Okay.” Several seconds pass before he asks, “Any particular reason why?”

“Because you rented us a lighthouse!” I throw my arms out and twirl around in circles, letting myself forget, for a little while, why we even need to rent a place to stay. “It's like, the coolest thing ever!”

“I'm glad you like it.”

“It's a lighthouse. On the ocean. Just for you and me. What's not to love?”

He doesn't answer, but when I catch sight of him as I'm spinning, I realize he doesn't need to. His face says everything, and that only makes me twirl faster.

I stumble to a stop because I've actually made myself dizzy with all the turning in circles. Of course, Hudson takes the opening, reaching out and snagging my hand before pulling me against him.

“Are you planning on taking advantage of me just because I'm dizzy?” I tease, slapping a playful hand against his chest.

“I was actually planning on steadying you because you were dizzy, but if you insist...”

He sweeps me into his arms as fast as a heartbeat and fades up the never-ending circle of stairs until he gets to the bedroom, where he tosses me on the very comfortable-looking bed.

It's thrilling and amusing at the same time, and I laugh as I land with a soft bounce. I hold out my arms to him, expecting him to come lay with me. Instead, Hudson drops my backpack on the end of the bed, then sits next to me and strokes my entirely too messy curls out of my eyes.

"You're so beautiful," he murmurs, his fingers lingering on the curve of my cheek.

"You're beautiful," I tell him back, turning my head so I can kiss his palm.

"Well, yes," he agrees with an oh-so-serious tilt of his head. "That's true. But the two aren't mutually exclusive."

"Oh my God." I grab a pillow and smack him with it. "You're unbelievable, you know that?"

"I believe you've mentioned it a time or three hundred," he answers right back before snagging the pillow from my unsuspecting hands. I brace for him to softly attack me back with it, but he tosses it on the floor before finally stretching out on the bed next to me.

"Are you hungry?" he asks.

"I am, but not enough to leave this bed to order food." I reach for my bag. "I think there's a couple more Pop-Tarts in here anyway."

He rolls his eyes. "One can't live on Pop-Tarts alone, Grace."

"Maybe not, but I'm totally willing to give it a try." I open the crinkly silver package and break off a piece of the cherry-flavored pastry before shoving it in my mouth.

Hudson shakes his head, but his eyes are indulgent as he watches me.

"How about you?" I ask after I take a few more bites. "Are you hungry?"

I meant the words innocuously enough, but the second they leave my mouth, they take on a life of their own. Hudson's eyes gleam, my stomach flips, and suddenly the whole room feels lit up with a tension that has my heart beating way too fast.

"What do you think?" he asks after several charged seconds drag by.

"I think you're starving," I tell him, just before I lift my chin in invitation. "I know I am."

"Have another cherry Pop-Tart, then." But his eyes are fire as they race over me, lingering on my lips...and my throat.

I tilt my head a little more and stroke my fingers over the sensitive skin at

the base of my neck. "That's not the kind of hunger I'm talking about."

Hudson makes a sound deep in his chest—part pleasure, part pain—and releases a long, shuddering breath that has my hands shaking and my stomach clenching in anticipation, even before he lowers his mouth to my neck.

"Grace." My name is a little more than a whisper, a little less than a prayer, as he presses gentle kisses along my collarbone and the hollow of my throat. His lips are warm and soft, and they feel so good—*he* feels so good—that I place my hand against the quilt to make sure I'm not floating away.

Except Hudson's got me like he always does, his hands sliding down to hold my hips and press me even more firmly against him.

My fingers clutch convulsively at the brown silk of his hair as he kisses his way back up my neck. Pleasure slides through me, makes it impossible not to let loose the whimper welling inside me.

The sound of Hudson's answering groan—a little dark, a little desperate, and all dangerous—takes the intensity up a notch or twelve. My fingers tighten in his hair; my body arches against his as I gasp out his name.

I'm desperate for him to stop playing.

Desperate for him to do what my body is screaming for.

Desperate for him to do what my every cell, my every molecule, is *begging* for.

Hudson knows—of course he knows. His dark little snicker is proof that he's holding back on purpose, *torturing* me on purpose. Maybe I should be annoyed by his restraint, by the way he stokes the need seething inside me until it grows into something wicked and wild and wanton. Until it grows into something that I barely recognize.

And maybe I would be if it was someone—anyone—else. But this is Hudson. This is my mate. And the way he's trembling against me is proof that he is just as overwhelmed, just as lost in how new and precious this all is as I am and doesn't want to rush a single moment. Which is enough, more than enough, for now.

At least until he presses a long, lingering kiss on the delicate skin behind my ear.

Just like that, my whole body goes on red alert. My restraint melts away, as does my pride.

"Please," I beg, arching my neck until it nearly hurts in an effort to give him all the access. "Hudson, *please*."

"Please what?" he growls in a voice so raspy, I almost don't recognize it.

I want to answer him—I try to answer him—but my voice is gone, drowned in the wild cacophony of sensations rushing through me.



And when he finally lowers his mouth to his favorite spot, the pulse point at the side of my throat, my entire soul cries out for him.

He kisses me once, twice, and just like that, my blood is gasoline, the tip of his fang as it coasts along my skin the match that sets me ablaze. That ignites me, even before he groans and finally—*finally*—strikes.

His hands tighten on my hips as his fangs sink deep, and for one brief moment, I feel the sharp pain of it all, the sudden, violent piercing through skin and tissue, blood and vein. But the pain fades as quickly as it came, leaving nothing but pleasure and heat in its wake. Heat that brushes over my skin, swims through my blood, sizzles along my nerve endings. Heat that swamps me, overwhelms me, makes me burn and burn and burn.

I'm shaking now, electricity zinging through my body, lighting me up like the aurora borealis that dances across the night sky in Alaska.

And as Hudson slides deeper, his fangs sinking into me—through me—I can't help thinking that folklore has it all wrong. The stories say vampire bites are something to fear, but there is nothing scary about Hudson's bite, unless you count the way it makes me feel.

The way it makes me need.

The way Hudson makes me crave him, until nothing and no one else exists but us.

Until there is no Cyrus.

No war.

No death.

Until there is nothing but Hudson and the current arcing between us.

He groans low in his throat, his fingers digging into my hips even as I arch and tremble against him. Even as I plead with him to take more of me. More and more and more, until there is no me and no him. There is only us, drowning in each other. Incandescent with pleasure.

I shiver with each second that passes, and I lean farther into Hudson, letting him take all of me—right up until he pulls away with a growl.

I whimper, try to hold on to him, to keep him deep inside me. But he is having none of it.

He lifts his head, cursing as he puts a few inches of distance between us.

It isn't much, isn't anything, really, but I feel it in my gut as I try to hang on to him. As I try to pull him back to my throat, back to my vein.

But Hudson resists, his bright blue eyes staring down at me with a concern that pours ice water over the flames deep inside me.

"I'm fine," I tell him, anticipating the question he's going to ask. "You didn't take much."

"I took too much," he shoots back in the proper British accent that turns me on at least as often as it annoys me. "You're shaking."

I roll my eyes even as I lean into him, taking my turn at pressing kisses along the strong, lean column of his throat. "I'm pretty sure my shakiness has nothing to do with blood loss."

"Oh yeah?" He lifts a brow. "And what does it have to do with, then?"

"Kiss me and I'll show you," I whisper against his skin.

"Show me, and I'll kiss *you*," he counters.

"I was hoping you'd say that." I scrape my teeth along his cut-glass jaw, and it's his turn to melt into me.

"I love you," he whispers into my hair, and the words are a jolt to my system. A good jolt, but a jolt nonetheless.

Someday, maybe, they'll be familiar. Comfortable. A warm blanket to wrap around my heart and soul. But today, they're fireworks. An explosion deep inside me that rocks me to my very core.

"I love you more," I whisper back, kissing my way down Hudson's throat. I nuzzle his collarbone even as my fingers dance along the buttons of his shirt. He needs a shower and so do I, but for now, the raw heat of him feels good.

Being so close to him only makes the urgency more intense.

I tear at his shirt and mine, my fingers tangling in the fabric in my desperation to feel him against me. I need to hold him, to touch him, to know that no matter what happens next, *this* will always be here.

*Hudson* will always be here.

But before I can find a way to tell him that, Hudson breaks away from me—chest heaving, eyes gleaming, a tiny drop of my blood glistening on his bottom lip. His usually perfectly coiffed hair is disheveled, and he looks sexy as hell. I want nothing more than to run my hands through the silky waves again, to pull him up and over me and let the heat take us away from this mess for a little while.

But he's holding my hands in his, and it's obvious he's got something to say by the way he closes his eyes and takes one long, shuddering breath.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I just love you, that's all."

"I love you, too."

"And I'm sorry—"

"For loving me?" I ask, a sudden chill chasing away all the heat inside me.

“No!” His eyes—his beautiful blue-sky eyes—fly open. “I could never be sorry for that. I’ll love you for the rest of my life.”

“You mean eternity?” I say with a laugh. “I can get behind that.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about, actually.”

“Eternity?” I tease, doing my best to ignore the warning bells going off in my head. Because this is Hudson, and he would never do anything to hurt me.

He swallows, his jaw working furiously. “I need you to do something for me.”

“Anything.” The response comes from deep inside me.

This time when he closes his eyes, he dips his chin so that his hair falls forward. I push it back up so I can see his eyes when he opens them, focusing on the way the soft, cool strands feel wrapped around my fingers instead of worrying about whatever it is he’s about to tell me. I mean, it doesn’t take a genius to figure out that whatever it is, I’m not going to like it.

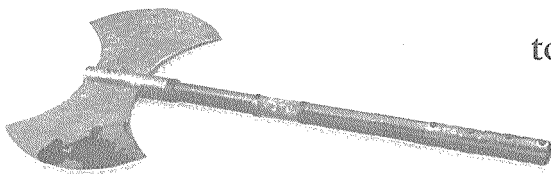
He lifts my hand, and this time he’s the one who kisses my palm. He’s the one who holds on tight for one second, two. Then he opens his eyes, and there’s a resolve there that was missing a few moments ago. My stomach shimmies a little, and not in a good way, even before he places my other hand, with the Crown tattoo, over his chest.

“I want you to use this on me.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, confused.

“I want you to use the Crown to take away my powers.”

## I Just Want to Power Down



I burst out laughing. I can't help it. The idea is just so absurd that there's nothing else I can do.

"Yeah, right," I finally say, flipping onto my side on the bed next to him. "I thought you were actually going to say something serious."

"I *am* being serious." He rolls onto his side, propping himself up on an elbow. "I really meant what I said. I need you to—"

"Of course you don't mean it," I deny, trying to ignore the sick feeling that's growing in the pit of my stomach at just the idea of what he's saying. "There's no way you could actually *want* me to take your power—and no way I would ever do it, even if you asked me to."

"You just told me you'd do anything for me," he answers quietly.

"And I would," I tell him. "Anything that's the least bit reasonable, I would do for you in a heartbeat. I would die for you, Hudson. But this?" I shake my head. "This isn't okay. You can't just ask me to—"

He lifts a brow. "Make it so I can't carelessly hurt anyone ever again?"

"You've never carelessly hurt anyone in your life." I take a deep breath, then blow it out slowly as horror churns in my belly. "Besides, this isn't about stopping you from hurting other people. This is about asking me to hurt *you*. Surely you can see that's what you're doing."

"I'm asking you to *help* me, Grace. You're the only one in the whole world who can." The torment in his voice has tears burning behind my eyes.

But I can't do what he wants. I can't. Even if I can figure out a way to find the missing Gargoyle Army and make the Crown work before we face Cyrus—and there's no guarantee of that—I can't just use it on my mate. I can't just strip him of one of the things that makes him who he is, even if that's what he thinks he wants.

I take a deep breath, then blow it out slowly in an effort to stave off the panic burning in my chest. "Hudson, I don't think this is what you really want."

“Even though I’m telling you that it’s exactly what I want?” he demands with the confidence that’s as much a part of him as his blue eyes and dark hair.

That’s as much a part of him as his powers.

“It’s been a terrible few days. None of us is in a good headspace. We were in prison a few days ago, then the battle, then Katmere. How can you even think of making a decision like this when we haven’t had a chance to process everything that’s happened?”

“It’s because *I have* processed what happened that I’m asking you to do this.” He shoves a frustrated hand through his hair. “Can you imagine how it feels to know that Luca is dead because I didn’t use my powers before he was killed? Or that my baby brother needed a dragon heart to survive because I was too afraid to use my abilities?” His voice breaks. “Or that I’m really afraid of what will happen if I *do* use my gift?”

He shoves off the bed and starts pacing the room even as he’s careful not to go near the sunlight pouring in through the window. “You have no idea what a burden this power is, made worse because, when it comes to your safety, I can’t be trusted to think before I act.”

“They were there to kill us, Hudson!” It’s my turn to be frustrated, my turn to tug at my hair. “It’s not like you just annihilated a bunch of innocent wolves. If they’d had a shot at ripping out our throats, they would have taken it.”

“And if there was another wolf like Dawud in that pack? Someone who couldn’t run as fast as them or who wasn’t as brave as they are? What if I killed them, too?”

“You don’t know that there was anyone else like Dawud—”

“And you don’t know that there wasn’t!” he snarls. “Besides, now we’ll never know. That’s my whole point.”

“So your answer is to give up your powers forever? Even though you might have done the right thing? Even though those wolves might have killed every single one of us?” I shake my head. “That doesn’t make sense. We’re in the middle of a battle for the whole world, a battle that will determine how paranormals and humans will live for centuries—and even *if* we’ll live. You’re the most powerful weapon we’ve got, and you want me to just drain you of your powers because you might make a mistake?”

“There’s no might about it. I did make a mistake. In fact, I’ve made several.” He blows out a long breath, kind of shakes his head. “And I didn’t mean for you to take them this second. I meant after we fight Cyrus. But I’m not asking this because I want you to save the world. I’m asking this because I want you to save *me*.”

The hurt in his voice is unmistakable, and it breaks my heart. And it also tells me more clearly than any words that I’ve handled this wrong. But can

anyone really blame me? Of all the things in all the world that I ever thought Hudson might ask of me, this wasn't even on the radar.

Then again, maybe it should have been. I've always known that Hudson has a very uneasy relationship with his powers—first, because of the way Cyrus used him when he was a child, and then because of what he did with them when he first got to Katmere. Add in everything that's happened lately, and is there any wonder that he's freaking out? Any wonder he thinks this is his only option?

But it's not. It can't be. Hudson's power is an integral part of him—as intrinsic to who he is as the sarcastic shield he maintains to keep others at bay and the powerful kindness that he tries so hard to keep others from seeing.

I'm frustrated, scared, and more than a little upset. How can he ask me to be the one to hurt him like this? I want nothing more than to pull the covers over my head and pretend this conversation never happened. But even though we're at a stalemate, I can't just leave things like this. Not when Hudson is so obviously suffering.

I don't know what to do to fix any of this, but sitting here arguing with him is only going to make things worse. So I climb off the bed with a sigh and cross to where he's standing. Or should I say leaning, considering he's doing that sexy-as-hell *shoulder against the wall* thing, arms crossed over his chest. He usually only does this particular pose when he's trying to act like he doesn't give a fuck about what's going on, and the fact that he feels the need to use it now, with me, makes me feel like the world's shittiest mate.

"Hey," I say when we're once again face-to-face. "Can we talk about this some more?"

He lifts a brow. "It's hard to talk when someone has already made up their mind."

"Yeah, well, I could say the same about you." It's the wrong thing to say, and I know it the second the words leave my mouth. Shit. "I didn't mean—"

"Do you know what it's like to be me, Grace? Do you know what it's like to spend your childhood locked away so you could become the strongest weapon possible? What it's like to have to work, every second, to make sure you don't hurt someone or take their will away from them?"

Sadness wells up inside me. I hate that he's in pain, hate even more that he thinks the only way to stop that agony is to have me violate him, *hurt him*, in this most terrible way. "Oh, Hudson. I can't even imagine—"

"No, you can't. That's the point. And you don't even know half of how my powers work—what they cost me." He throws his arms up in frustration and turns to walk away. But at the last second, he turns back to me and—very quietly—says, "Every time I use them, a little bit of the light fades inside me, Grace. I'm afraid

one of these days, I may not make it back to you. I may not make it back to *me*.”

“Then don’t use them!” I beg him. If he doesn’t use his powers, then everything will be okay. He won’t have to suffer, and I won’t have to be the person who takes away a part of him that makes him who he is.

But Hudson just shakes his head and turns to stare at the ocean out the window. “You forgive me for Luca dying, but one day, someone will die who you won’t be able to forgive me for not saving. And I’ll lose anyway, Grace.”

“I would never blame you for not killing someone to save us,” I plead, grabbing his shirt and turning him to face me fully, to see the conviction on my face.

“What if it were Macy who dies next, and I was right there? All I had to do was disintegrate two wolves to save her. What then?”

I want to say he’s wrong. That I would understand, but for a second, I open my mouth to say of course he would kill two wolves to save Macy—and that’s when I realize he’s right. We all assume it’s Hudson’s choice when to use his gifts to save us, but is it really? I know that I will always love him. I will always be on his side and support his choices. But if I’m being honest, there’s a part of me that would be shattered that he didn’t do everything he could to save the last family I have left, the girl who would do anything to save the rest of us.

And he can see it in my eyes, too, because he whispers on a ragged breath, “Grace, I am begging you. Please. Don’t leave me like this. I don’t know how much longer I can take it without losing myself forever, without losing you.”

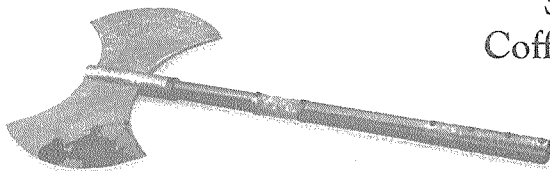
And just like that, my heart breaks wide open. Because I would do anything for Hudson—absolutely anything. Except this. As much pain as I know his gifts cause him, deep down I know something he hasn’t considered. While using his powers might one day break him in a way he can’t recover from, there’s no guarantee. And with his mate by his side, I have a chance of pulling him back, of helping him always find himself again. But if I were to take his powers and someone tried to harm *me*—and succeeded because he didn’t have his abilities—well, that’s a pain his soul would never survive, no matter who was left to pick up the pieces. I know this as surely as I take my next breath—because I would feel exactly the same way if our roles were reversed and something happened to him.

Being a mate means having each other’s backs. Always. And I would wear the Crown for an eternity if it meant saving my mate’s life.

Either way, now isn’t the time to convince Hudson I’m right. We’re exhausted to our bones. But I can tell he’s waiting on me to agree to end his pain, just as I am certain for the first time since I’ve known him, I’m going to disappoint him.

And I don’t have a clue where we’re supposed to go from here.

## Sometimes the Coffee Breaks You



**H**e must read my refusal on my face because his shoulders slump for a second, maybe two.

Then he straightens up, and he's got his inscrutable face on, the one he shows the world. Even his eyes—which are always soft for me these days—look blank.

“Hudson—”

“It's okay,” he says, and his smile as he tucks my hair behind my ear is one of the saddest things I've ever seen. “Why don't we try to get a little sleep?”

I want to argue with him, want to stay up until we solve this problem. But the truth is, I am so tired that my head feels fuzzy, and trying to deal with this feels like the end of the world. Maybe some sleep is exactly what we both need before we try to come at this problem again.

God knows, being a little more clearheaded definitely won't hurt anything.

“Okay.” I get up to head to the bathroom to take a shower, but I'm afraid I could fall asleep standing under the water. In the end, I strip down to my bra and panties and climb into bed. Hudson joins me seconds later, and I'm asleep before he even manages to pull the blanket over us.

I sleep like a stone—pun totally intended—for four hours and only wake up because Hudson is sitting on the end of the bed with a cup of delivery coffee in his hand.

The cowardly side of me wants to keep my focus on the coffee—anything is better than seeing the defeated look that was in his eyes when we went to bed—but he deserves better than that. Our relationship deserves better than that.

So I slowly, carefully lift my gaze to his and shiver in relief when I realize the eyes staring back at me are as soft and indulgent as usual. Still, I can't help but ask, “Are you okay?” Because I'm not sure that I am.

“I'm chuffed. Amazing what even a few hours' sleep will do for a bloke.”

Now I'm really concerned, because usually Hudson only sounds this British



when he's pissed as hell and swearing up a storm. Which means what exactly? He's pretending to be okay but actually isn't? Or he's accepted my decision and is trying to live with it?

Either one is a punch to my gut—the last thing I ever want to do is hurt him—as is the fact that I don't know what to do, what to say, to make things better for him.

In the end, he makes things better by holding the cup of coffee just out of my reach. “You’ve got fifteen seconds to wake up and take this,” he teases, “or it’s going straight down the drain.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” I say, taking the lifeline he’s offered me. Offered us.

“You don’t think so?” He starts to stand up, but I grab on to him and pull him back down, then reach for the cup with grubby hands.

“Give me, give me, give me,” I tell him.

He offers it over with a grin. “I tried four different places, and apparently Ireland is not big on Dr Pepper. Or Pop-Tarts.” He hands me a white paper sack. “There’s a fruit salad in there, along with some yogurt, a muffin, and a sandwich from the bakery down the road.”

“What bakery?” I ask, looking out the window at the cliffs and raging ocean, which go on for as far as the eye can see. The only structures in sight are the two houses that are part of this property, where the others are staying. “And what road?”

He shrugs. “Okay, maybe it’s a little farther than down the road. But I tip well, so it all evens out in the end.”

“Of course it does.” I roll my eyes as I put my surprisingly delicious takeout coffee on the nightstand and reach for the bag. My stomach is so excited at the prospect of real food that it’s practically dancing—which is when I realize it’s been a while since I’ve eaten something other than Pop-Tarts. Maybe Hudson is right. A girl can’t live on Pop-Tarts alone, no matter how much she wants to.

“What about Macy and the others?” I ask as I fork up a grape.

“I ordered food for them, too,” he answers as he takes a long swallow from the water bottle on the dresser.

“You’re the best,” I tell him with a grin, finally beginning to really relax. *Things are okay between us*, I tell myself. *Hudson is okay. Maybe all we really did need was some sleep.*

He tilts his head in that way he has that means, *Obviously*. “I try.”

We talk about nothing special while I eat—Ireland, our friends, Cyrus—but the minute I finish the last bite of sandwich, Hudson takes my hand and says,

“We need to talk.”

And shit. There goes my optimism. And my ability to breathe. Because, a few hours’ sleep or not, I haven’t changed my mind about his powers. “I’m sorry, Hudson. I’m so sorry—”

“Don’t worry,” he says, holding up a hand to stop me. “It’s not about that.”

“Then what?” I ask warily. “Because no good conversation ever begins with those words.”

“Maybe not,” he answers with a rueful look. “But let’s just say there are degrees of bad, and this one isn’t all that.”

“Okay.” I pull in one last bracing sip of coffee as panic brushes its wings against the inside of my stomach, turning it hollow and jumpy and making me regret all the food I just ate. “So what kind of bad is this?”

“Not bad at all, if you take the long view.”

“Fantastic. I mean, who doesn’t love to play the long game?” I give a heartfelt sigh even as I brace myself for whatever he is going to say. “Okay, then. What’s up?”

He starts to talk, then breaks off with a nervous laugh. “Why don’t we both just relax for a second?”

I lift a brow. “Pretty sure the ship has sailed on that one.”

“Yeah.” He sighs. “You’re right.”

And then he doesn’t say anything else for what feels like forever.

I’m super antsy now, anxiety crawling around my insides, turning them to mush. I try to tell myself that whatever it is Hudson has to say isn’t that big of a deal, but Hudson isn’t known for making a big deal out of nothing—last night being a prime example. So whatever it is, it’s important, and these days, important almost always translates to bad.

“I’ve been thinking about the Gargoyle Court,” he finally says, right before I’m about to jump out of my skin.

It’s not the turn I expected the conversation to take, and I blink at him for a few seconds, then start with, “What about it?” Before he can say anything, I continue. “I know everyone thinks I’m delusional, but I swear—”

“None of us think you’re delusional,” he soothes. “Which is why I’ve spent the last several hours going over what you saw. And trying to come up with an answer.”

“Did you find one?” I ask, even though I already know. Hudson wouldn’t be trying to be so delicate with me if he hadn’t thought of something. And if that something wasn’t likely to upset me.

"Maybe." He narrows his eyes in contemplation. "Do you remember that night in the laundry room? When you danced with me?"

"You mean when you told me to shut up and dance?" I ask with a soft grin, because of course I remember.

"I believe the music did that." He flashes me a wicked smile.

"And who controlled the music?"

He shrugs. "Not my fault I have good taste and impeccable timing."

"Not to mention a totally manageable ego," I shoot back with a roll of my eyes.

"Being humble is highly overrated." His grin fades. "Anyway, that's when you saw all the strings for the first time, right?"

"It is, yeah," I agree. I can't figure out where he's going with this, but I know it's somewhere important. I can see it in his eyes, hear it in his voice.

"It's the first time I saw your bond with Jaxon up close and personal." He grimaces. "That was fun."

"I bet." I squeeze his hand. "What are you getting at here, Hudson? Because I need to tell you, this piece-by-piece thing you've got going on is really freaking me out."

"Sorry. I'm just trying to lay the groundwork." He leans over and gently kisses me. "And there's nothing to be freaked out about anyway. I promise."

"Okay." I don't believe him, but I figure now isn't the time to get into that. Not if I have any hope of him getting to the point sometime soon.

"There was also a green string. Do you remember it?"

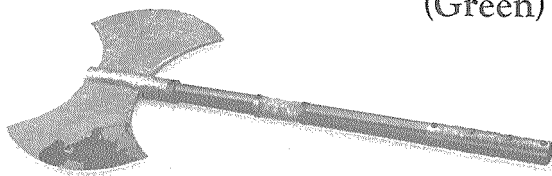
"Remember it? I see it every time I go to touch any of my strings. Which I do all the time, considering the platinum string is how I become a gargoyle."

"Yeah." He clears his throat. "So do you know what that green string connects you to?"

And just that easily, the butterflies in my stomach become giant man-eating moths. "I think the better question is, do *you* know what the connection is?"

His gaze is steady on mine as he answers, "Maybe."

## (Green) String Theory



““M aybe’ isn’t actually an answer,” I say, watching him closely for anything that might give away what he’s thinking.

“It is when I don’t know for sure if I’m right.” He pauses. “I’d planned to talk to you about it when we first got back to Katmere, but honestly, there just hasn’t been time, and I wasn’t even sure I was right. But your memories of going to the Gargoyle Court... Like I said, I’m not for sure that I’m right...”

“Yeah, well, you don’t know if you’re wrong, either, so just spit it out before I totally lose my shit here. Who does my green string connect me to?”

“Do you ever remember touching it?” he asks. “Maybe brushing against it?”

I’m about to say I don’t think so, but when I look inside myself at the strings, I can’t help noticing just how close the green string is to my platinum one. And considering how often I reach for that string—and the situations I’m in when I do—anything is possible.

“I don’t know. I mean, maybe I have. Why?”

“Can you really try to think about it?” he asks. “Did you touch it that time in the library when we were having a fight and you turned to stone?”

“I don’t think so...” I begin, but the look on his face says this is important—really important—so I close my eyes and try to picture it in my head.

“I was so mad at you that day. You were being a total jerk, and I just reached in and grabbed the platinum string and—” I break off as I see my hand wrap around my gargoyle string and, as I do, my knuckles just barely graze the green string.

“Is that why you freaked out?” I ask. “Because you knew I was touching that string?”

“I freaked out because you were turning to stone—real stone, like you did those four months we were trapped together.”

“Are you saying it was the same?” I ask incredulously.

“I’m saying it seemed the same to me, both times.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense.” I shake my head even as I try to wrap my

brain around what he's saying. "I didn't even know the strings existed when I first turned to stone, so how could I have touched the green string way back then?"

"Instinct?" he suggests. "Accident? If it happened, does it really matter how?"

"I don't even know why it matters that it might have happened," I tell him.

"Because you want to know how you got to the Gargoyle Court. And I'm pretty sure the green string is the answer."

"But I didn't touch the green string before we went to the Gargoyle Court."

"Are you sure about that?" Hudson asks.

"Of course I'm sure. He brushed against me and—" I break off as I realize that Hudson might be right. I was rushing for my platinum string when it happened, and I wasn't being overly careful about it. It's totally possible that my fingers brushed against the green string.

"I don't understand," I say after a second. "I've never been to the Gargoyle Court. I never even imagined that it might still exist. How could I be the one who took us there just by brushing against my green string?"

"I don't know, but I'm almost positive you did."

"All my strings connect me to someone. You, my friends, my gargoyle. So why does this string have the power to—" I break off, searching for the best way to describe what the green string does and realizing I don't even know.

"Freeze time?" Hudson fills in the blank.

My stomach—and everything else inside me—plummets to the floor. "Is that what it does?" I whisper. "Freezes time?"

"It's what you do. It's what you did with us for those four months. And it's what you did—or I should say the opposite of what you did—when we came back and, well, time was different."

"What does being able to freeze and unfreeze—" I ask, but Hudson quickly interrupts me.

"Grace, who else do we know who can freeze and unfreeze time?"

"Who else—" I break off as horror swamps me. "I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"I think we *have* to talk about it," Hudson says grimly. "Because she's the only other person in the world I know of who can do what you do."

"Which means what exactly?" I ask, even though the sick feeling in my stomach warns me that I already know.

"I'm not sure. But I think we'd better find out." He clenches his jaw before adding, "The Bloodletter might be the only person who can help us find the Gargoyle Army, Grace."

Buckle Up,  
Buttercup

“I knew you were going to say that,” I groan, rolling over to bury my face in the nearest pillow. I don’t want to see that woman again. I just don’t.

Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. I barely resist the urge to scream my head off into the pillow—the only thing stopping me is the fact that I can feel Hudson’s eyes on me, and I know he’s already concerned. The last thing I need is to lose it completely in front of him.

But come on. That woman is heinous. *Heinous*. I know she’s helped me—for a price—every time I’ve asked something of her, but does help unraveling her mess negate the fact that she’s the one who caused it to begin with? Does it negate the fact that she’s the one who set all this in motion when she manipulated a mating bond between Jaxon and me?

My parents’ deaths, Xavier’s and Luca’s deaths, Flint’s leg, *Jaxon’s soul*... All these things are because the Bloodletter meddled in my life.

It’s that thought that has me turning over, that thought that has me reaching for Hudson’s hand and pulling it to my chest where I can cradle it as I look into his eyes. He’s grinning down at me indulgently, but the corners of that million-dollar smile of his are wilted and just a little forced-looking. His cheekbones seem a little more prominent than usual, and his gorgeous eyes look storm-tossed, like a cyclone is whirling inside his head, just out of sight.

“You okay?” I ask, even though I know he is anything but.

The grin kicks up a notch. “Of course.”

“You don’t look okay.” I reach my free hand up to stroke his cheek.

He gives me a mock-affronted look. “Wow. So the bloom is off the rose already, huh?”

I roll my eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“Do I?” Carefully, he moves the remnants of my lunch off the bed. And then he tackles me, rolling me over and over until we’re balanced on the opposite

edge of the bed. He's on top of me, his ridiculous face only inches from mine.

"Still think I look bad?" he asks, his fingers dancing over my ribs as he tickles me.

I'm too busy laughing my head off to answer.

"Is that a no?" he asks as he tickles harder and faster.

"Stop!" I gasp, laughing so hard, I'm practically crying. "Please stop!"

His fingers slow. "Does that mean you're done insulting me?"

"I don't know," I say, grabbing both his hands in mine. "Does that mean you're done throwing a wobbly?"

"Throwing a wobbly?" His brows shoot up. "*Someone's* been practicing their Britishisms. Although technically, I was *not* throwing a tantrum, I'll have you know."

Oh yeah, I got that word wrong. Dammit. I'd been reading up on British slang and wanted to impress him. "Yeah, well, someone is mated to a Brit, and she figures she should probably be able to understand him the next time he *throws a wobbly* and busts out the slang."

His eyes take on a wicked gleam. "I think you understand me just fine."

"I do," I agree. "Which is why I'm worried about you, Hudson."

"Nothing to be worried about," he answers, and for a second I think he's going to tickle me again. In the end, though, he just grins down at me with a soft look in his eyes.

I know I should push, know I should make him talk about what's bothering him. But when he's looking at me like this, and we have a few moments to just be, without all the shit we have to deal with crashing in on us, I don't want to push. I don't want to do anything but hold Hudson close to my heart—and the rest of me—for as long as I can.

So I do, wrapping my arms and legs around his body and burrowing as tightly against him as I can possibly get. "I love you," I whisper against the cool skin of his throat. I can feel his heart beating too fast, can feel the ragged up and down of his chest as he struggles against demons he doesn't want to share.

"I love you, too," he whispers back and just holds me, too.

Eventually, though, reality intrudes in the guise of a string of text messages hitting both our phones at the same time. The others are awake and ready to plan.

Hudson rolls away to grab his phone, and I pull a pillow and yank it over my face. Maybe if I play ostrich, I can get away with not being part of this discussion. And subsequently not doing what I know needs to be done.

"You know the longer you hide under there, the more decisions will be made

without you, right?” he asks, amusement threading its way through his accent.

“You act like that’s a bad thing,” I shoot back—and end up with a mouth full of pillowcase for my trouble.

Hudson laughs as he pulls the pillow off my face.

“Hey, give that back.” I make a grab for the pillow, but he holds it out of reach. “You’re really not going to be reasonable about this, are you?”

His smirk grows bigger. “Because I’m the one being unreasonable here.”

“Fine.” I flop back onto the bed and stare at the white tile ceiling. “We can go see the Bloodletter.”

“And you’ll keep an open mind when you talk to her?”

“Are you serious?” I demand incredulously. “You’re the one who is constantly fighting with her, so why are you lecturing me about keeping an open mind?”

“I’m allowed to fight with her—she hates me. But she has a major soft spot for you. Which means if we want to get anything out of her, you need to play nice with the old bird.”

“What does it say about me that a homicidal old woman with a major agenda has a soft spot for me?” I wonder.

Hudson grins and finally drops the pillow next to me on the bed. “That you’re so amazing, even a psychopath has to love you?”

“Now you’re just kissing up.” And then, just so he doesn’t think he’s gotten away with anything, I pick the pillow up and throw it at him.

He catches it with a wink—big surprise—then asks, “Is it working?”

“What do you think?” I climb out of bed, snagging my backpack on the way to the bathroom. Maybe I’ll feel better about this whole thing after I get dressed.

With that thought in mind, I brush my teeth, turn the shower on, and try really, really hard to ignore the fact that Hudson has Linkin Park’s “One Step Closer” playing softly in the other room. I know he thinks I can’t hear it with the shower running, but it’s one of those songs that’s impossible to ignore—especially considering what he asked me before we passed out.

Is it just a random selection from a playlist? Or did Hudson subconsciously choose this song because it mirrors how he’s feeling? Just how close he *is* to breaking?

It’s a fucked-up thought in the middle of a fucked-up situation, and I spend half an hour stewing about the whole mess while I shower and get dressed. It’s a little after ten a.m. now, which means it’s the middle of the night in Alaska—maybe not the best time to drop in on the Bloodletter, but since sunrise is still another three hours away, it’s pretty much the perfect time for Hudson to be



there, considering he can't be in the sunlight right now. Which means I have almost no time to prepare for this. I just have to do it.

Still, before we go in there begging for answers—which pisses me off just to think about—I figure I should at least try to make sure Hudson is right. So after I pull on my hoodie, I lean against the bathroom vanity and close my eyes. Then I take a deep breath and let myself look—really *look*—at all the strings deep inside me. Which, oddly enough, doesn't mean actually looking with my eyes.

I mean, it's just easier to describe how I *see* my strings as *looking* at something, but I'm not using my eyes to see them. I think of them and then can see them in my mind, the same way I can see my childhood teddy bear, Rascal, or my mother's smile when I choose. And so I *look* inside for my strings, and they're all there, just like always.

The bright blue mating bond string with Hudson. The now-all-black string that connects me to Jaxon. My platinum gargoyle string. The hot-pink one for Macy. The super-thin turquoise one that is my mom and the russet-brown one that is my dad—I shudder a little as I realize just how precarious those bonds have gotten. It makes sense, I guess, considering they've been gone for months now. But it still hurts more than I want to admit to see them disappearing a little bit at a time.

I go through all the strings one by one, saving the green one for last because I don't want to deal with it. And, not going to lie, because I'm a little scared of it, too. Especially since it's glowing brighter than any other string except my mating bond with Hudson. I don't know what that means, and I'm not sure I want to know. The last thing I want or need to find out is that I'm also mated to some vengeful old woman who lives in a cave.

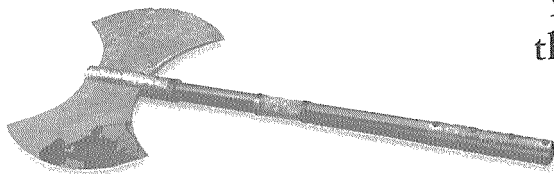
It's a little too paranormal Mother Goose for me, thank you very much.

Still, I'm learning that hiding from my problems doesn't make them go away. So I take a deep breath and, without letting myself think any more about it, I grab the green string intentionally for the first time in my life.

And I am not prepared in the slightest for what happens next. I thought maybe I would turn to stone, maybe the clock on my phone would slow down. Hell, maybe I would even turn into a twenty-foot-tall gargoyle.

Any of those things would have been better than this, this *anarchy*.

## 36

You Bring Out  
the TNT in Me

Electricity zaps through my body so fast that it steals my breath. And then I feel it, coiling deep inside me, like a cobra waiting to strike. More and more power, twisting, turning, filling every cell in my body until there's nowhere left for it to go. The tattoo on my arm that can store magic fills instantly, and still, there's even more power coursing through my veins, screaming at me to let it out. Let it do what it was meant to do: destroy everything in its path.

And I've never been more afraid in my life. Of this thing inside me, this burning need to set the world on fire and just watch it burn, burn, burn.

I instantly let go of the string, but the power coiling all my muscles tight is still shrieking to be set free, and I know I only have seconds before I can't control it anymore. My gaze bounces around the bathroom for an exit, but as soon as I realize the only way out is the bathroom door, I hear Hudson in the other room tell someone, "Come on in. Grace is just getting out of the shower, but—"

Acting purely on instinct, I dive into the bathtub and curl into myself...just as my body explodes, or what I think is my body exploding. There is a deafening, thunderous clap as all the electricity inside me is released in an instant. The shock wave shakes the walls, the mirror shatters, and the ceiling caves in around me, exploding plaster causing a dense fog of dust to make it impossible to see anything.

Hudson throws open the door as I take in shallow breaths, my ears ringing and my vision blurring, a panic attack seizing my body. What did I just do? And how?

I didn't hold the string for more than a couple of seconds, and it almost swallowed me whole, turned me into someone I barely recognized—a monster who wanted to devour the world.

I pull my knees up under my chin as I rock back and forth in the bathtub, tears streaming down my cheeks. For a minute, I worry my tears will scare

Hudson, but I must have accidentally turned on the shower when I hopped into the bathtub because water is spraying against one side of my face, washing away my tears.

"It's okay, Grace. I've got you," Hudson whispers in my hair, but I can't figure out how, when I'm in the bathtub and he's by the door...

The ground is moving up and down, and I blink. "Did I— Did I break the Earth?" My voice is thin and shaky, but Hudson must have heard me, because he chuckles, although it sounds more like nervous laughter than that I actually said something funny.

"No, babe, you didn't break the Earth. But I'm pretty sure I'm never getting my deposit back. In fact, I might now need to own a lighthouse."

Something feels soft beneath my legs before I realize Hudson must have carried me from the bathroom back to bed. His hands roam over my wet clothes, checking for injuries, but I'm too shocked to do more than pull into myself in silence. It's almost impossible to get a lungful of air into my chest, and I'm feeling faint from the shallow breaths, my hands shaking as I wrap them around my knees and wrap myself into a ball.

"Is she okay?" Macy asks from the doorway, then gasps. "What happened?"

"Can you tell me what two plus two is, Grace?" Hudson asks.

Why is he giving me a math test when I can barely breathe? Oh my God, I must have hit my head, and he's worried I have a concussion. My teeth are chattering so painfully, it feels like they're going to shatter at any moment, but I manage to say, "Fa-four."

"That's right, babe. What about four plus four?"

I take another quick breath, then another, and stutter, "Ay-eight."

"And eight plus eight?"

I take a deeper breath this time and open my eyes to show him I'm okay. He must be frantic if he's this concerned about a head injury. After another slow breath, I manage to say, "Six-teen."

Hudson lets out a long sigh, slides his body onto the bed beside me, then scoops me onto his lap. I curl into his warmth, my teeth already chattering less as he wraps his arms around me.

"Take one more deep breath, Grace. That's right. You're going to be okay." His hands stroke up and down my arms, chasing away the icy wake left by touching that damn green string.

I glance at my cousin, who waves her wand toward the bathroom before walking over to stand beside the bed now, shifting from foot to foot, unsure what

to do, how to help. I reach out and grab her hand. “I’m fa-fine.”

Jaxon and Mekhi are in the doorway an instant later, their gazes both locked on the bathroom I’d just been in, mouths hanging open, and I turn to see what they’re looking at. And freeze.

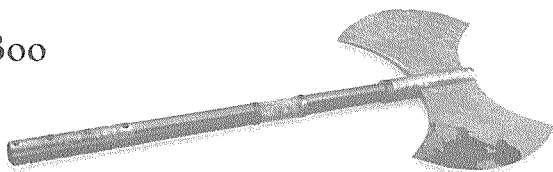
The entire bathroom wall separating the bedroom from the bathroom is gone. As is the wall on the other side of the tub, giving the room a lovely wide view of the ocean beyond. The sink is lying on the ground, cracked into two porcelain chunks beside broken pipes, and I vaguely realize Macy must have been waving her wand to stop the water that’s coating the room from continuing to spray. The bathtub survived the explosion, but not much else. Part of the ceiling lay across the edges of the tub, where my legs were. I shiver as I realize that a couple of inches higher and it would have come crashing down directly on my head instead.

“What the fuck happened here?” Jaxon asks, his head swinging to Hudson and me. “Are you okay, Grace?”

“I’m fa-fine,” I repeat a little steadier, but that’s all I can manage to get out.

Hudson raises one eyebrow and says, “I’m pretty sure Grace decided to grab her green string—and shaved a hundred years off my life.”

## More Like Tickety Boo-Boo



“**T**he green string is—” I pause, sort through my vocabulary for how to describe it, and realize there really is no perfect word. Eventually, I settle on the best answer I can. “Dangerous.”

Hudson grins down at me. “Well, that sounds exciting.”

“Sure, okay.” I shake my head. My mate is seriously deluded if he thinks *that* was fun. I’m still weak when I turn back to my cousin, but one look at her makes me shove my own problems to the side. Because my sweet cousin looks like she’s a woman on a mission. And not just any mission, one where she plans to take no prisoners.

She looks fierce as hell, her hair done up in shades of red, orange, and yellow, making her head look like she’s caught fire. Thick eyeliner edges the lids of her eyes, and her clothes are solid black like coal.

“Your hair looks amazing,” I say, and it’s true.

All she says is, “It felt like time for a change.”

“Well, I love it,” I tell her, reaching out to touch the vividly colored strands. “You look incredible.”

“Fake it till you make it, right?” she says with an unhappy twist of her lips, and my chest squeezes tight.

“Something like that,” I agree as I motion for her to sit on the side of the bed. “What’s up?”

She rolls her eyes. “I wanted to complain about my mom, but that can wait.” She gestures to the missing wall, then waves her wand at me, instantly drying my clothes before tucking the wand back into her fanny pack. “Felt like a little minor redecorating this morning?”

I start to brush it off, but the look she gives me warns me not to do that. I sigh deeply—I really don’t like thinking about what this means—and say, “Hudson thinks my green string ties me to the Bloodletter in some way.”

"The Bloodletter?" Macy's eyes go wide, and her voice squeaks a little as she asks, "*Like, lives in a cave and is the most dangerous paranormal on the planet Bloodletter?*"

"Is there another one?" Hudson asks drily.

"God, I hope not." She mock shudders. "So how does that make you feel?"

My gaze flicks to Jaxon's back as he and Mekhi are lifting the fallen ceiling and dealing with the destruction in the bathroom. He acts like he's not listening to every word we're saying, but he hesitates at Macy's question, and I know he's waiting to hear my response. What I find more curious is that he doesn't seem at all surprised to hear I'm somehow linked to the Bloodletter. I make a mental note to ask him about it later, then turn back to Macy.

"How do you think it makes me feel? Like I want to puke. She's awful, and I swear to God, if I find out I'm mated to her, too, I'm hanging up my wings, my crown, and everything else I can think of."

Hudson laughs. "Mating bonds don't work that way. You can't have multiple mates without the other mate interested—"

"Yeah, I've heard that before," I interrupt with a snort. "And look where that got me."

"Mated to me is where that got you, thank you very much." He tries to sound properly indignant, but he's laughing too hard.

"So what do you want to do?" Macy asks after a second.

"What do I *want* to do?" I counter. "Or what do I think we *should* do?"

She laughs. "One of these days, those two things are going to be the same."

"Yeah, well, today is definitely not that day."

"That's what I figured." She pauses, twirling one fire-red lock of hair around her finger as she looks anywhere but at me. "Do you think she knows anything about my mother?"

"Honestly? I think she knows something about everything. I definitely think you should ask her when we go."

"So we're going?" Hudson asks.

"Once again, the difference between 'want' and 'should.' Of course we're going. Do I want to? Not even a little bit. But I have questions and so does Macy, and we both deserve answers."

"I know you're right. But the truth is, I don't even know what I'm supposed to ask." Macy throws up her hands as she looks back and forth between Hudson and me.

"How about, 'Why did my mother abandon me to run off with the vampire

king?” Hudson suggests. “Or, ‘Why hasn’t she contacted me in nearly a decade?’ Or, my personal favorite, ‘Why would a witch work for the most evil fucking vampire in existence?’”

“All good questions,” Macy agrees on a shaky breath. “The only problem? I don’t know if I can handle finding out the answers.”

“Oh, Mace.” I squeeze her hand.

She squeezes mine back for a second before pulling away. “And not just that, why wouldn’t my father tell me? He let me think she just left us and that he had no idea where she was.”

“Maybe he doesn’t—” I say, but she cuts me off before I can add anything else.

“I don’t believe that. You know how many times he speaks to Cyrus in a year? Or how many times he’s been to the Vampire Court over the last eight years?” She shakes her head. “There’s no way he didn’t know. And that means he deliberately didn’t tell me. Worse, he flat-out lied to me when I asked.”

She’s right. I know she’s right, just like I have a pretty good idea of what she’s feeling. Because every time I find out my mom and dad lied to me about something else, it makes me feel the same way. Betrayed. Hurt. Angry. Gullible.

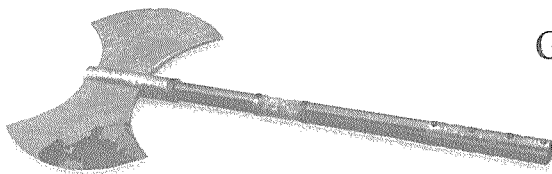
Like, how didn’t I know? How didn’t I see all the tiny inconsistencies there must have been? Nobody keeps this many lies hidden—lies that have to do with everything they are and everything they believe—without making some mistakes. How did I not see through it all?

The fact that Macy is probably asking herself that same question—and feeling that same pain—makes me furious with Uncle Finn. Why would he keep this from her? And was he ever going to tell her? Or was he going to let her live her life thinking her mother had just vanished off the face of the earth?

“We really do have to visit the Bloodletter,” I say, the words sticking in my throat. Because if I had my way, I’d never see that bitch again. “If we’re going to rescue the kids and see your parents again, we need more answers. And Hudson and I think she might be able to tell us where the Gargoyle Army is hiding.”

“Well, an army at our backs would be helpful,” Macy agrees with a sigh. “When?”

I want to put it off, but when my gaze meets Hudson’s electric-blue one, I know that’s not going to be an option. Even before he quirks a brow and says, “There’s no time like the present.”

Divide and  
Get Conquered

“I knew you were going to say that,” Macy sighs again. “I can open a portal to Alaska, but not one into the Bloodletter’s actual cave, since I’ve never been there, so make sure you bring your jacket.”

She’s talking to me, not Hudson, obviously. My hoodie is the warmest thing I packed, and I’m already wearing that. I get up and look through my backpack, though, to see if there’s anything else I can layer and register the fact that I’ve only got one more set of clean clothes left, which means I’ll have to do laundry as soon as we get back to the lighthouse. We all will, considering the others don’t even have that.

Jaxon and Mekhi went to gather the gang, so I’ve got a few more minutes to enhance my wardrobe for the trip ahead.

“Can I just say that needing to worry about having clean underwear and stopping the apocalypse at the same time really freaking sucks?” I grumble as I pull my sweatshirt off over my head to layer on another T-shirt under it.

“True story,” Macy agrees.

“I’ll go shopping when it gets dark,” Hudson says, closing his phone after an interesting call with the homeowner.

From what I could overhear, he is now the proud owner of a historic lighthouse in Ireland. Which, I have to admit, only makes me cringe a little that it’s because I blew up a bathroom. I mean, when this is all over, I totally plan to come back here and show my mate how much I *really* love lighthouses.

“The former owner is going to send a contractor over to put some plastic over our new...window.” Hudson winks at me and adds, “I’ll see if I can pick up a few things for everyone when I go later.”

“You don’t have to do that—” I start, but Macy gives me a *shut up right now* look before batting her lashes and flashing him a super-sweet smile.

“You’re the best, Hudson.”



"So Grace keeps telling me," he agrees with a sly grin directed at me.

I roll my eyes. "As if." But when he holds out a hand to me, I take it. Because he's Hudson and he's mine, ridiculous requests—and ridiculous ego—aside.

"Usually, I like doing portals outside because there's more room, but since that's out of the question with neighbors so near," Macy says, "I can probably get one going downstairs."

"Considering what you did to get us to the Witch Court, I'm pretty sure you could open a portal anywhere," Hudson tells her.

"Right?" I shake my head, still astonished at the way she held the portal open even after she'd come through it. "That was completely badass. I mean, I didn't even know that was possible."

"That's because very few witches can do it," Hudson tells me before turning to my cousin. "The Witch Court should be kissing your arse instead of kicking you out."

"Yeah, well, the Vampire Court should do the same for you," she answers. "Cyrus is...I can't think of a strong-enough word."

"A psychopath," Hudson says flatly.

"Agreed," she says, and we all turn to head down the stairs.

Jaxon must have told everyone to get over here fast, because the whole gang is crowded into the narrow downstairs living room. Mekhi is lounging on the brown leather sofa, his legs propped up on the coffee table. Byron is sitting beside him, while the rest of the Order is hanging out on the barstools at the kitchen countertop. Dawud is taking up the only chair while Flint and Eden are leaning against the far wall. And Jaxon is just standing in the middle of the room like he owns it.

There isn't three square feet without a body in it, and I wonder if Macy plans to open a portal in the closet.

"We're going to the Bloodletter's," I announce. "Not everyone needs to go, though, if they don't want to. I know I don't want to."

"Seriously?" Dawud asks, eyes wide. "You're just going to drop in on her?" They sound like it's the most bizarre thing they've ever heard. Then again, maybe it is. The woman is practically feral, after all.

"I'm in!" Mekhi's booted feet hit the floor. "I've always wanted to meet her."

"Me too," Liam agrees.

"No," Jaxon says, "I need the Order, except for Mekhi, to go to the Vampire Court."

The room falls silent as every last one of us gazes at him.

"It's the only solution," he says. "We need information. Where Cyrus is keeping the kids, are they in danger right this minute, or do we have more time to strategize, anything useful."

Hudson clears his throat. "So you're leading your friends to their deaths, then? I didn't know you had it in you, Jaxon."

That earns him a glare. "Luca's parents were loyal to Cyrus—there's no reason to assume the Order won't be welcome as well. And if they seem suspicious, tell them you're all tired of being on the losing side of the fight." He waves a hand in my direction.

"Gee, thanks," I grumble.

Liam shakes his head. "I don't think anyone's going to buy that. I think we should all stick together. You might need our help with the Bloodletter."

"*Make* them buy it," Jaxon says. "We're only going to get so far without someone on the inside. It'll be safer if it's the whole group of you. Besides, I was raised by the Bloodletter. We'll be fine. You're needed to spy on Court for us."

Liam looks like he's going to object again, but Dawud's hand shoots up. "I'll go. No one knows I'm here, and Cyrus trusts my family."

I arch a brow. That last little bit is a lot to unpack, but I'll save my questions for when we're not so pressed for time. "Eden and Flint are coming with us."

Flint rubs his hands together. "Well, *this* ought to be fun."

"Is there anything we need to do to prepare?" Eden asks, looking a little shaken.

"Just make sure you keep your hands in your pockets," I mutter as I grab my shoes from their spot near the door and bend down to put them on. "She bites."

Jaxon shoots me a reproving look. "Only when she's hungry."

"Or provoked," Hudson volunteers.

"Yeah, well, you would know," Jaxon tells him.

He shrugs. "It's not my fault she doesn't appreciate my sense of humor."

"Because so many others do," Flint accuses.

I know he's lost his boyfriend and his leg to this fight—not to mention his brother. I know his mother sacrificed her dragon heart to save Jaxon, which might very well cost him his legacy, as well. I know he's got a right to be furious. But that doesn't mean he has a right to take it out on Hudson, who's fighting right alongside him, whenever he wants.

I don't call him out on it, though, not in front of everyone. But I'm definitely going to find a time to talk to him about it again later.

Macy turns to Jaxon. "Where is her cave? I don't need exact coordinates,

but a general idea would be good so I know what part of Alaska I've visited that's closest to her."

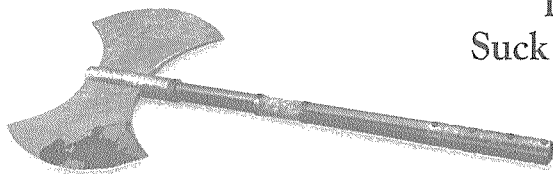
"Aim for Copper Center, if you've been," Jaxon answers. "I'll take it from there."

"As it turns out, I have been to Copper Center itself more than once," Macy answers with a grin. "Which should make this a lot easier than I was afraid of. But first, let me open a portal near the Vampire Court for the others."

She lifts her arms and starts to spin the portal open. Behind us, the Order and Dawud get their final instructions from Jaxon, Mekhi offering some advice about where they might be holding the kids. Flint watches with a tight-lipped expression. Across the room, Hudson and Eden laugh about something I wish I could hear. Maybe it'd calm me down.

Because at the moment, I can't help the fear swirling in my stomach that I'm not going to like what the Bloodletter has to tell me about my green string and the shitstorm I just made of my bathroom.

## It Sucks to Not Suck You Anymore



After a quick trip through Macy's rainbow portal, Jaxon, Flint, Mekhi, Eden, Macy, Hudson, and I find ourselves right in the middle of Copper Center, Alaska—at one in the morning. Or at least, I'm assuming it's right in the middle of the town, as we're surrounded by buildings, which I've found doesn't happen very often in this state.

"Nice job, Macy," Jaxon says, giving her an encouraging little pat on the shoulder. It's so unlike him that she turns to stare at him with her mouth open—as do I. I'm just beginning to wonder if he was body snatched in the portal when he follows it up with, "Let's get going."

The fact that he fades straight north without even thinking to ask the rest of our opinions reassures me, though. He's the same old Jaxon, even if he's looking more approachable than I've ever seen him.

Hudson rolls his eyes at me, and I just laugh. At least until he scoops me up in his arms and fades after Jaxon across a wide-open field.

"I was going to fly," I say, even as I settle myself more comfortably against him.

"I figured. But if you flew, I wouldn't get to do this," he answers, leaning forward so that his lips skate across my cheek. "Or this," he continues, right before he kisses me quickly.

"You make a solid point," I agree. I'm out of breath, and so is he, though I'm pretty sure it has nothing to do with how fast he's running. To test the theory, I kiss him again, then can't help laughing when he stumbles over a rock for pretty much the first time *ever*.

"Bloody hell!" he mutters even as he catches himself—and me. "You're dangerous, woman."

"Glad you finally figured that out," I tease as we race over the ground. It's dark, obviously, but the moon is bright enough that I can see the flowers and the creek beds with water rushing down them.

I've never been here when the whole area wasn't covered with snow, and I'm surprised my hoodie is enough defense from freezing my butt off.

After about thirty minutes, Hudson stops fading and comes to an abrupt stop next to Jaxon.

"Is this it?" Mekhi catches up and asks, wide-eyed and a little excited.

"This is it," Jaxon answers as he walks carefully through the rocky ground toward the cave entrance, still partially camouflaged.

We all decide now is a good time to take a quick break before we enter the vampire's lair. You never know with her if you'll need all your strength for a fight or not.

"Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?" I ask Jaxon, motioning with my head to join me off to the side of the cave entrance. Macy and the dragons are milling around, grabbing a water or snack after the journey here, psyching themselves up to confront a woman who regularly hangs people upside down in her house over a bucket.

"Sure, what's up?" He follows me around a tree and smiles down at me, and there's something about him in this moment—something warmer than I'm used to—that just kind of opens him up.

He's still got the whole bossy attitude—I don't think anything will change that—but he looks less isolated, more *happy*, I guess is the word I'm looking for. Which makes me hesitate on whether or not we should have this discussion. I decided the other day that he deserves to know the truth about the Bloodletter, about what she did with our mating bond, but the last thing I want to do is hurt him any more than he's already been hurt.

But when he lifts his brows, I can't think of anything else to say to take its place. Plus, I don't have the right to keep this information from him. I thought I did, justified why there was no point giving him the truth if it would only cause him pain, but I hate when other people keep stuff from me. I can't just turn around and do the same to him.

Which is why I nod toward an area a little farther away from the rest of the group and their super-hearing abilities and begin to walk that way. Jaxon follows me, but when I glance back at the group, I notice Hudson is watching us. He doesn't look jealous, and to be honest, he doesn't even look curious. He just looks resigned, and I realize a little late that I probably should have given him a heads-up that I planned to tell Jaxon everything. I'm not even sure why I didn't. Maybe I thought he'd try to talk me out of it.

"Grace?" Jaxon asks when I continue to stare behind me. "Are you okay?"

“Yeah, of course.” I yank my attention back to him. I am the one who started this, after all. “I wanted to talk to you for a couple of minutes. About the—” Nerves get the better of me and my voice breaks, so I clear my throat and try again. “About the Bloodletter. There’s something you should know.”

Understanding dawns on his face, and he reaches for my hand, squeezes it tightly. “You don’t have to say it.”

“Yes, I do. I don’t want to not tell you something—”

“She already told me,” he interrupts. “The last time I was here. It’s okay, Grace.”

Of all the things I expected Jaxon freaking Vega to say to me in this situation, *It’s okay, Grace* didn’t even rank in the top one hundred thousand. For a second, I think my head might explode as the anxiety that had been coiling in my stomach launches upward, lodges in the back of my throat.

It takes me a little bit to actually form words again, but eventually I manage. “Wait a minute. She told you what she did? *With the mating bond?*”

“She did,” he answers. “I know it sucks—”

“You know it sucks?” I squawk loudly enough that one of the bald eagles flying above us will probably mistake it for a mating cry. “That’s all you have to say about what she did to us? That it *sucks*?”

His smile falters, and for a brief moment, that same sad look that breaks my heart is back in his eyes. “I don’t know what else to say, Grace. I hate that you got hurt, hate everything you’ve had to go through because of one misguided decision—”

“Misguided?” I wonder if I should be looking around for cameras right about now. Because surely, surely I’m being punked. There is no other explanation for Jaxon taking this so calmly. “How can you be so understanding? How can you just forgive her for nearly destroying our lives like that? You almost lost your soul, Jaxon. You almost...” I break off, unable to even talk about what almost happened just a few days ago.

“She gave me you,” he answers simply. “Whatever else happened, whatever else will happen in the future, she gave me the gift of being loved by you. Of loving you. Do you know what that means for someone like me? I didn’t feel anything my whole life, and then you came into it and now I can feel...everything.”

Tears bloom in his obsidian eyes. He blinks them away as quickly as they came, but it doesn’t matter. Because I saw them, and they break my heart wide open all over again.

“Oh, Jaxon—”

"It really is okay, Grace." He reaches forward and boings one of my curls like he used to. "Being able to love you means maybe I'll be able to love someone else someday, maybe even the mate who was actually meant for me. Before you, I never could have imagined such a thing. And now..." He shrugs. "Now it doesn't sound so bad."

My heart pangs at his words. Not because I still love him like that—Hudson is my everything—but because I *still* love him. He's my family, and I want nothing more than for him to be happy—not just someday, but right now.

"You're the best. You know that, right?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Maybe."

I roll my eyes and bump him with my shoulder, but he just laughs and asks, "What do you call a boomerang that won't come back?"

"A boomewon't?" I ask without much hope.

"A what?" He shakes his head in mock disgust. "That was really bad. Like, really, really bad."

"Oh yeah? So what's the answer, genius?"

"A stick, obviously."

It's my turn to laugh, because, "That's so bad, it's good."

He looks extra proud of himself. "Exactly."

We turn to walk back toward the cave, and my eyes immediately go to Hudson. He's not watching us anymore. In fact, he's not looking at anyone. Instead, he's leaning up against a tree off to the side, scrolling through his phone like he's on the most fascinating feed ever.

He looks normal, so normal that I'm sure the others don't even notice. But I know him well enough to see the way his index finger is tapping on the back of the phone case like it does when he feels uncomfortable. I can see the tight jaw and braced shoulders, like he's prepared for a blow—and to make sure it looks like it rolls right off his back.

The pain at seeing him like that is way worse than a pang to the heart. It's a punch to the stomach, an ache that travels all the way through me.

Maybe that's why I turn to Jaxon and ask, "Hey, can you do me a favor?"

"Of course. Anything." His brows shoot up.

"Lay off Hudson a little. He—"

"It's not that easy, Grace."

"I know it's not. But think about the conversation we just had. You forgave the Bloodletter so easily, and she nearly destroyed you. She nearly killed your soul."

"Yeah, but he let Luca—"

“Do you think it’s easy for him?” I ask, annoyance turning my voice sharp. He crosses his arms over his chest. “It doesn’t look hard.”

“To kill people?” I ask, incredulous. “You don’t think it weighs on him? You don’t think it hurts him every time he uses his power like that? He may not let you see it, but he’s struggling. Struggling with the fact that he didn’t step in before Luca died. Struggling even more that he *did* step in and kill all those wolves indiscriminately.”

I shake my head, realizing for the first time that I’m disappointed in Jaxon. Disappointed in Flint and Mekhi and Macy, too. Hudson is hurting to the point of begging me to take away his powers, and they can’t see beyond their own emotions.

“It’s a terrible power to have, Jaxon. The decision over who lives and who dies with a snap of your fingers—less than that, really. With a thought. One quick thought. In that one tiny moment, someone’s brother will never come home, someone’s child, someone’s mother. And you know as well as I do, most of the people who follow Cyrus aren’t evil like him. They just want to step out of the shadows.” My voice catches as tears clog my throat. “And Hudson killed them all in the blink of an eye to save us at Katmere. If you can’t see what that cost him, what it continues to cost him, then you’re the worst brother ever, and he deserves better.”

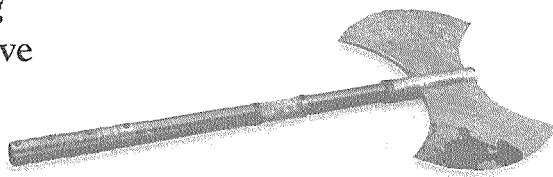
The muscle in Jaxon’s jaw clenches, but he doesn’t say anything, doesn’t uncross his arms. But he is listening, I can tell, so I press my advantage. “The Bloodletter had a detailed plan that took away our choice in a mate, a plan that nearly cost you your soul. And you forgive her like it’s nothing. But your brother doesn’t want to use his power to kill people, doesn’t want to be anything like your father, and *he’s* the asshole?”

Jaxon doesn’t respond, but he does nod before we turn and continue walking back to the others. And when we do, he looks at Hudson and asks, “Want to give me a hand with the rest of these wards?”

It’s not much, but it’s a start. And I will take it.



## My, What Big Fangs You Have



Nothing looks familiar to me, but it's dark, and the obligatory layers of snow are long gone, so I'm not surprised. Then again, I had a terrible time finding the cave even when it was light out.

Jaxon obviously doesn't have the same problem, since he walks unerringly toward a tiny opening in the rocks, unraveling safeguards as he goes. Hudson takes the opposite side, removing safeguards there as well. They're both superfast at it, and within a couple of minutes, we're walking down the narrow ice chute that leads us deeper into the cave.

It's dark, so I pull out my phone to light the way to keep from slipping on the ice. Macy does the same thing, and we exchange commiserating looks as we pick our way down the slick tunnel.

A quick glance at Flint shows that his new prosthetic is holding up well, despite how slippery the ground is. I can't help noticing, though, that I'm not the only one checking. Jaxon—who has dropped back to the rear—is walking right behind Flint, his eyes locked on the dragon and poised to catch him at the first sign of a problem.

Flint, on the other hand, isn't paying attention to any of us—and he's not paying attention to the ice, either. He's locked inside his head, his jaw working and gaze far away.

"This place is wicked," Eden says, and when my flashlight glances off her, I can see she's looking around, eyes wide with awe.

"You have no idea how much," I tell her.

"What do you mean—" Eden breaks off as we round a corner. And what I mean becomes exceptionally obvious.

Because right in front of us, to the left, is my least favorite part of the Bloodletter's Cave—I mean, except for her.

It's the draining station.

And it's being put to full use—what looks to be an entire group of hikers hanging from the chains embedded in the ceiling. Their throats are cut open, and they are draining into buckets, which is a sight I've sadly gotten used to over my past couple of visits.

What is different this time, however, is that the Bloodletter is standing next to them, wiping blood from her lips with a fine linen napkin. Blood, I'm pretty sure, that is still warm.

She *just* killed these people—all six of them. And judging from the lack of defensive wounds I can see on them, even in a group, they never stood a chance.

And I get it. Or at least I tell myself I do. This is part of this world. Humans are the food supply for vampires. And while some, like my friends, drink a mixture of animal blood and blood from a more-than-willing human whom they *don't* kill (hello, Hudson), others are a little more old-fashioned. Like the Bloodletter. And Cyrus. And who knows how many others.

It's terrible to think about, though. And even more terrible to see—which is why I make a point of not looking too closely. At the bodies currently draining or the drops of blood on the Bloodletter's chin.

Macy stumbles when she gets her first look at the hikers. She screams a little as she falls, and I honestly don't know if it's the fall or the dead hikers that have her so freaked out. Probably both.

Eden darts forward and catches Macy. "Did she just—" she starts to ask, then snaps her mouth shut when the Bloodletter turns to look at her with swirling green eyes.

"My dear Jaxon, you've brought an entire tour group," the Bloodletter says in a saccharin-sweet voice that cuts like a scalpel. "And with no warning. To what do I owe the *honor*?"

Jaxon bows his head, and not for the first time, I'm struck by how much deference he shows this woman. How much respect and kindness and fear she engenders in him.

After everything that's happened—everything that I've learned about her—it's almost more than I can bear.

Maybe that's why I step forward and tell her, "Coming here was my idea."

Of course, Hudson chooses that exact moment to follow with, "Solitude is highly overrated. But we don't have to tell you that, since you know so much about it." The fact that he's leaning against an icy wall, playing Sudoku on his phone while he says it like the game is a million times more fascinating than standing in front of the most badass vampire in existence, only makes it more

of a *fuck you* to her.

And every single person here knows it.

Jaxon makes a choking sound deep in his throat, and I'm pretty sure the noise coming from Macy is a whimper. Flint and Eden don't make a sound, but they don't have to. The looks on their faces say it all, like they're just waiting for her to smite him.

I, on the other hand, half expect her to freeze him like she did last time, but she makes no move toward him. She does, however, shoot him a look as cold and sharp as the icicles hanging from the ceiling of this tunnel. "And yet, here you are. Which I can only assume means my aid isn't overrated, even if I myself am."

"I don't know about that," he responds with a shrug. "Even a broken clock is right twice a day."

Now Macy isn't the only one whimpering. Flint lets go of his mad long enough to look at Hudson like he's lost his mind...and also to glance around the ice chute for an escape hatch. I don't blame him. If Hudson keeps antagonizing her, we're definitely going to need one. Or two.

Which is why I step between them. I love Hudson, but if the Bloodletter loses her temper and turns him into a cockroach because of his attitude, I'm going to have to seriously reconsider our mating bond.

"I'm the one who needs advice," I say, resting a gentle hand on Hudson's arm to keep him from saying anything else. He and the Bloodletter took an instant dislike to each other when they first met—mostly because at the time, she was trying to convince me that he was a stone-cold killer with no remorse. Add in the fact that she created a fake mating bond between Jaxon and me, and she is pretty much his least favorite person on the planet. Which is saying something, considering Cyrus exists.

Not that I blame him. I feel exactly the same way about her. But I also don't want to have to come back here again, so I'd rather just suck it up and get the information we need. If she's somehow tied me to her the way she tied Jaxon and me together, I want to know about it. And then I want to figure out how to make it disappear.

At first, the Bloodletter doesn't even bother to look at me. Instead, she stays laser focused on Hudson—eyes narrowed, teeth bared, fists clenched. While he, on the other hand, barely deigns to glance her way. I've known him for months, and I have never seen him this interested in his phone. Or Sudoku.

I rush on, in the hopes she stops looking at my mate as if she'd like to see him hanging over a bucket. "I'm able to see connections to everyone who has an

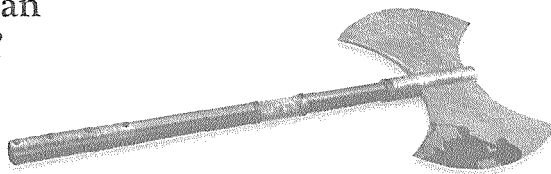
emotional tie to me in my head, including to my gargoyle. I see colored strings, for lack of a better word. And one of those strings...I think one of those strings ties me to you. And it's powerful."

The Bloodletter takes her time turning to look at me, but when she does, her expression is considerably softer.

"Come." She holds a hand out to me. "I find the cold tires me lately. Let's go into my parlor where it's warm."

And then, without pausing to see if any of us is bothering to follow her, she turns and toddles back down the icy walkway, looking for all the world like she's aged a hundred years in the months since we've seen her last.

## Don't You Mean Darth Madar?



“Jaxon, can you please get me a blanket?” she asks, her voice wavering just a little as she sinks down on the white velvet sofa.

The sitting room has changed again, I notice, as Jaxon pulls a blanket out of the chest by his feet. The walls are lavender now, the same color as the armchairs positioned across from us. Both the couch and chairs have pillows with violets and greenery on them, and the fireplace at the end of the room casts a rosy glow on all of us.

“She has a fire?” Macy whispers to me as Jaxon lays the blanket over the Bloodletter’s lap. “In an ice cave?”

“How does she keep the ice from melting?” Eden asks.

“It’s an illusion,” I answer. “Just like the rest of the room.” And her frailty? I wonder as she takes a minute to arrange herself. Is that an illusion, too? And if it is, what is the most powerful vampire in the world going for by pretending to be weak?

“Would anyone like some tea?” the Bloodletter asks, waving her hand, and a teapot and cups suddenly appear on the coffee table.

“Is there really tea?” Macy asks in an aside. “Or is that an illusion, too?”

I shrug, shake my head. Despite the fact that there is some bizarre green string connecting us, I am about as far from an expert on the Bloodletter as anyone can get.

When no one answers, my cousin says, “Thank you. I’d like some tea,” into the silence. The look she shoots me says that there’s only one way to find out.

A savage amusement lights the Bloodletter’s eyes when she turns to her. “By all means, dear.”

Macy leans over, tipping the teapot and pouring the warm amber liquid into a cup. She grabs a pair of little tongs and drops two sugar cubes into the hot liquid as well. Though that leads to another question—

“Where does she get the sugar cubes if she prefers her food...bloody?” Eden wonders softly.

Yeah. That question.

Macy’s hand shakes as she leans over the cup, blowing softly to cool the tea before she takes a sip. I mean, she said she wanted a cup. She can’t back out of it now just because we’re all suddenly unsure where the sugar—or tea, for that matter—comes from. The pleasantly surprised look on her face, though, says it’s actually good—which is another question for another day. Because when the Bloodletter pins me with her very direct, very intimidating gaze, I realize that our time is up.

Even before she says, “Grace, dear. Why don’t you come sit on the couch with me? We can talk about this question of yours.”

I don’t want to sit on the couch. In fact, I don’t want to go anywhere near her. But the look in her eyes says she won’t take no for an answer. And since we—since *I*—need her help, it’s the same old story, different day. Play by her rules or get out.

Which is why I make my way toward her, under Hudson’s and the rest of my friends’ careful gazes. I don’t, however, sit on the couch. Instead, I choose to sink into one of the pretty lavender armchairs. Being accommodating is one thing, but being a pushover is another.

And I am more than sick of being a pushover when it comes to this woman, who has caused the people I care about so much pain. This woman whose machinations set so many horrible things in motion.

The Bloodletter raises her brows at my choice of seat, and when that doesn’t get me to change my mind, she stares me down for several seconds as my friends shift uncomfortably. I stare back, refusing to be intimidated by her for one second more. Is she capable of killing me? Absolutely. Do I believe she’ll do it right here, right now, in front of her precious Jaxon? I don’t think so. Not when she’s going through so much trouble to put on a show for him.

“Why don’t you come sit on the sofa, Grace?” she finally says in a voice made of steel. “Lately, my hearing isn’t what it used to be.”

“I’m comfortable here, thank you,” I tell her, deliberately raising the volume of my voice so the poor old thing can hear me. I barely resist an eye roll at the thought.

Her eyes narrow, and I wait for her next parry. Which—it turns out—is to snap her fingers and freeze everyone else in the room. As soon as they’re frozen, her face somehow changes from the soft vulnerability she’s been projecting

since we got here into the hard, violent woman I know and definitely don't love. The woman who is more than capable of taking down an entire hunting party without batting an eyelash.

"What game are you playing, Grace?" she snaps out in a voice that brooks no more disobedience.

But I'm over catering to her. If she wants to rip out my throat, then I guess she's going to have to try to do just that. Because I'm not rolling over for her. Not this time. Not ever again.

"I'm pretty sure that's the question I should be asking you," I snap back.

"I'm not the one who came to find *you*," she replies, and she's not wrong. Which grates just a bit too much for my liking.

I narrow my gaze on her. "No, but you're the one who keeps making it necessary for me to come to you." Then, taking a deep breath in an effort to keep my worry at bay, I brush my hand over the green string deep inside me as well as the strings of my friends and mate. That's how I unfroze Hudson when we were here last time, and maybe it will work—

A glance over my shoulder shows that it has. My friends are all unfrozen, and none of them look like they're any wiser for it. Except maybe Hudson, who is watching both of us with careful, considering eyes.

The Bloodletter has her hand lifted, like she's ready to freeze my friends yet again. And I lean forward, say through clenched teeth, "Stop. Stop trying to play God with my friends and me."

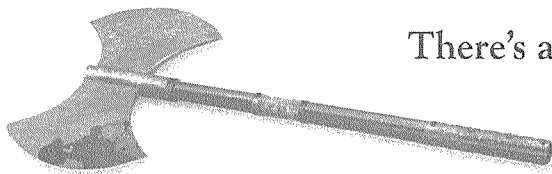
She pauses at my words, her lips twisting into something that looks a lot like an amused smirk. "You're asking for more than you know, Grace."

"Oh yeah? And why is that?" Because, seriously, how egotistical does a person have to be to have a comeback like that?

"It's kind of hard for me not to play God," she finally says. "Considering who I am."

"The oldest vampire in existence?" I make sure that my tone says it's no big deal.

"The God of Chaos," she answers, her green eyes doing that strange swirly thing that makes everything inside me feel queasy. "And that green string you keep brushing against? It *does* connect us—because you're my granddaughter."



## I Don't Think There's a Chromosome for This

Her words hang in the air like a grenade with the pin just pulled. And like a grenade, there's only a few seconds of stillness before the bomb explodes and all hell breaks loose.

Shock ricochets through the room.

Macy gasps.

Mekhi rocks back on his feet.

Eden murmurs, "Holy shit!"

Even Flint's normal thundercloud expression dissolves in an astonished, "What did she say?"

Only Hudson and Jaxon don't respond to her words, and as my blood runs cold, I turn around to look for them—to see if they believe her. To see if *I* should believe her.

Hudson hasn't moved from where he's leaning against the wall, but there's a tension in him that wasn't there before. A kind of watchfulness that tells me, appearances aside, he's paying very close attention to this conversation and that maybe—just maybe—she isn't saying anything that he didn't expect to hear. Which makes me wonder what else he's been piecing together in that too-sharp brain of his and why he hasn't seen fit to share any of it with me.

When our gazes meet, he smiles just a little. There's encouragement in that smile, encouragement and support and a belief in me that grounds me, that makes me believe that I can do anything—even if that means taking on the Bloodletter on her own turf.

Jaxon, on the other hand, looks as shocked as I feel—not to mention angry as hell when he marches forward to stand behind me.

"What are you talking about?" he demands. "You're a vampire—"

"I choose to be a vampire," she answers. "Just like my sister chooses to be human. And Grace is a gargoyle. That doesn't mean there isn't something else there."



“You could choose to be something else?” I can’t stop the question from tumbling out of my lips. It’s such a contrary thought to how I feel, that being a gargoye is a part of who I am on a cellular level. Would I choose to be a different creature if I could?

The Bloodletter raises one regal brow. “Of course. I created paranormal creatures from the source of my power, so they are all a piece of me, and I them. All my creatures are beautiful and perfect. Well, except”—she glances over at Flint—“the dragons. I still cannot believe I gave you so much power and strength, and you prefer to let a little bauble or gold bring you to your knees. Such an ultimately weak creature.”

Flint growls, leaping forward and landing before Jaxon. “You bi—”

But Flint breaks off when she sends him slamming against the nearest wall. Jaxon rushes to Flint’s side, but he shrugs off Jaxon’s help, pushing himself to his feet on his own. Not willing to leave the insult against his people alone, he goes to lunge for the Bloodletter—who looks nothing if not amused—but Mekhi and Eden are right there, blocking his path to her.

“What’s wrong with you?” Flint yells, anger radiating from every pore. “Who the fuck does she think she is?”

“Someone who can do and say whatever she wants,” she answers calmly.

A god, she seems to be implying.

“Yeah, well, god or not, you’re still an asshole,” he snarls.

This time, she doesn’t bother throwing him into a wall. Instead, she snaps her fingers, and Flint ends up hanging upside down, inches from the ceiling.

“Someone ought to teach you to keep a civil tongue,” she snarls back.

His only answer is to flip her off while upside down. Which only pisses her off more. She lifts a hand to smite him—or whatever the hell it is gods do—but Jaxon moves in front of Flint.

“Don’t do it,” he warns, and for a second it looks like she’s going to smite him, too. But in the end, she just shakes her head and drops her hand with a sigh.

Flint falls along with it, so quickly that he has no chance to shift, no chance to right himself. I shriek and start to race for him, but Jaxon is already there to catch him, his black boots braced on the slippery ice.

Flint lands against him with an “oompf,” and for a second, it feels like time stops. But then Flint is growling, “Get the fuck off me,” as he shoves at Jaxon’s chest.

Jaxon lets go the second he’s got Flint’s feet safely on the ground, but he keeps a steadying hand on the dragon’s elbow—at least until Flint shrugs him off.

Silence reigns across the cave as we all come to grips with the fact that the Bloodletter is even more powerful than we thought. That—despite her little fragile act from earlier—she is most likely more than capable of kicking any and all of our asses.

It's a hard pill to swallow, considering what she just told us.

But now that the shock has worn off from her initial declaration—or at least dulled it a little—I want to argue with her, to tell her it's impossible we're related.

Then she turns to me, and I see something new in her swirling green eyes. Something that looks a whole lot like vulnerability.

Or at least it feels that way, especially when I think about the fact that she called me her granddaughter.

My head pounds. My stomach rolls and pitches. My knees shake.

The God of Chaos. She's the *God of Chaos*? I didn't even know that was a thing. I didn't know any of this was a thing.

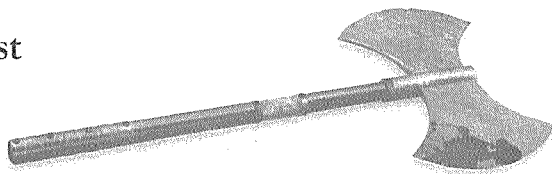
I mean, yes, the Crone told us a story about how the God of Chaos created paranormal creatures, but I thought that's what it was—a story. And I know this world is filled with a myriad of creatures and experiences I never imagined were real before I stepped inside Katmere Academy, but *actual gods*? Of chaos and who only knows what else? That's a far cry from figuring out my boyfriend is a vampire.

And she thinks she's my grandmother?

Like tumblers in a lock clicking into place, Alistair's comment that his mate might bite me if I insult her makes so much sense now. The gargoyle king is mated to the Bloodletter. Which is not the weirdest thing I've discovered today, sadly.

But then my stomach turns to stone as a horrifying thought occurs to me. I promised the Unkillable Beast I'd give his mate the Crown.

## Mommy Not So Dearest



“**Y**ou may call me Grand-mère,” she continues. “Although your power is that of a daughter, not a granddaughter.”

“I don’t know what that means,” I tell her and bite my lip. There’s a part of me—a huge part, if I’m being honest—that hopes she’s being metaphorical.

She looks like she’s about to say more but then glances toward the others and tells them, “Sit.” As she does, extra chairs pop up around the room.

Though there is now a seat right next to him, Hudson makes his way over to me and sits in the other lavender chair while Eden and Mekhi finally take a load off, too. Flint and Jaxon don’t move to sit.

The Bloodletter smiles thinly as she turns back to me, one eyebrow arching as she ignores my comment and asks, “What really brings you here, Grace?”

“I told you. The green string.”

She steeple her hands in front of her chin and looks at me over them. “But you’ve been aware of that *string* for months. What suddenly made you decide to come to me about it today?”

“Hudson realized that when I touched it, I could do some of the same things you can do. Add in the fact that Alistair told me to come—”

“You’ve seen him?” The Bloodletter’s gaze narrows as she leans forward and grips my hand so hard, it hurts. “Is he all right? Where is he?”

I pull away slightly, but she’s shaking beneath that psychopath exterior, and my heart softens just a tiny bit.

“Yes, I saw him, but he’s gone now,” I say, thinking about that last encounter in the hallway. “He said he had to go find his mate. As for how he is...” I trail off, not sure how to describe him when “all right” seems like a stretch.

“He’s confused.” Hudson steps in, keeps me from floundering any more. “He was chained in a cave for a thousand years and attacked regularly by people who wanted to kill him. I feel like that would make anyone a little off.”

"It's the voices," I tell her. "He hears gargoyles' voices talking all at once inside his mind, begging him to come back, to save them. He can't quiet them, and he can't think over them. There are too many."

"Too many?" Flint speaks up for the first time. "How many gargoyles are there?"

"Thousands," the Bloodletter and I answer at the same time.

"Thousands and thousands," she continues when I fall silent. "And Alistair has been trapped with them for more than a millennium. He could filter them when he was in command. But being trapped in that cave..." She looks around her own cave. "I can see why he had a more difficult time blocking them as they became more desperate. There are so very many of them."

Another spurt of sympathy leaks through for her. I try to tamp it down, which shouldn't be hard when I remember all the terrible things she's done. But then I think about the fact that the Unkillable Beast is her mate and wonder if being trapped for a thousand years without Hudson would erode my humanity as well.

Which makes me consider what I would do to free Hudson if he were trapped for a thousand years. I don't like to think that I would put anyone else's life or happiness in jeopardy to save his, but I can't say that for sure. There isn't much I wouldn't do to keep him healthy and whole. Including fight with him about taking his powers when I really believe it's something he'll regret later.

"I don't get it," Macy says. "I thought Grace was the only gargoyle born in a thousand years. When she turned to stone at Katmere, it was a huge deal. Experts came from all over to see her because—"

"Because they believe her to be an impossibility," the Bloodletter finishes for her. "And she would be had she not come from a long line of gargoyles. Her mother was one, as was her mother, and her mother before her."

My throat tightens as betrayal sucks the oxygen from the room. I knew my mom had to be a gargoyle when Alistair told me I was his progeny, but hearing the Bloodletter say it, realizing my mother never told me something so essential about myself, is heartbreaking. Hudson must sense my distress, because he reaches over and pulls my hand into his lap, his strong fingers lacing with mine and squeezing.

"My mother knew she was a gargoyle?" I choke the question past the tightness in my throat on a ragged whisper. "And she never told me?"

The Bloodletter's eyes widen as she takes in my reaction. "She didn't know what she was any more than you knew."

I blink back the tears in my eyes, trying to sort through the information

the Bloodletter has shared so far. I am beyond frustrated at her methods of only telling us what she thinks we need to know. “Why can’t you ever just tell us everything?” I shake my head. “You know, we could have killed your *mate* when you sent us for the heartstone without telling us who he really was!”

The Bloodletter smirks. “No, you couldn’t have. He’s called the Unkillable Beast for a reason.” When it’s clear from my raised brows that I still don’t understand, she shrugs. “He’s mated to a god, Grace.”

I shoot Hudson a quick glance and swallow. Then I ask her, “Does that mean Hudson is immortal, truly immortal, like me, because he’s my mate?”

But she shakes her head. “I was born a god. I will always be a god, even if my power has been reduced to that of a demigod due to my sister poisoning me.” She leans back against the sofa cushions. “You are the descendant of a god and a gargoyle, therefore you will never be more than a demigod. Well, unless you were to Transcend, but that’s a conversation for a different day.”

My shoulders sag. For a moment, I allowed myself to imagine a world where I wasn’t afraid something, or someone, would one day take my mate from me. That I’d never lose the person I love most in the world like I lost my parents.

I grit my teeth. “Regardless, don’t you think everything would be easier if you just laid it all on the table? Told us everything for once?”

“Yeah, and maybe we wouldn’t have to watch more of our friends die,” Flint snaps, and I flinch. From his pain but also a little bit from fear at how the Bloodletter will react. It wasn’t that long ago she had him hung from the ceiling like fresh meat at a farmer’s market.

But she doesn’t even glance his way, her gaze continuing to hold mine.

“I am going to do something I do not normally offer anyone, Grace,” the Bloodletter eventually says. “I am going to give you a choice. I can tell you how to find the Gargoyle Army—the real reason you came to see me today”—Macy gasps, but the Bloodletter doesn’t miss a beat—“but it will require telling you everything about where you came from and who you really are. And I cannot promise you will like what you hear. Or...I can tell you how to run from Cyrus forever. Hide your friends, too. Both options will stop Cyrus, for now, but choosing to run won’t save those kids. Nor will it prevent him from continuing down his search for ultimate power, but you can have a full life. Away from death and destruction. As far away from pain as a person can hope to be. The choice is yours, Grace.”

And there it is, my weakness laid bare before everyone. Because I want so badly to take the out she’s giving me, and I can tell she knows it, too. I don’t want

to learn anything about my green string or how we're related, how my parents might have lied to me my entire life in ways I can't even fathom, or how I might be a pawn in a giant game of chess being played among gods, expected to live and die at another's whim, expose how little control I actually have in my life. I just want to go back to Hudson's lighthouse and be with the boy I love and forget there's a big, scary world out there.

My heart is pounding against my ribs so hard, it's a wonder they don't crack, and I wipe my damp palm along my jeans. I'm sure my other hand is just as sweaty, but Hudson doesn't seem interested in ever letting it go. Letting *me* go.

I turn toward my mate and bite my lip. I know what I *should* do. But the Bloodletter gave me a choice. The blue pill or the red one, to quote one of my favorite movies, and I want to take the blue pill so, so badly, my hands are shaking with the effort not to run. My lungs tighten.

Then my gaze connects with Hudson's, and the breath stills in my chest.

In a blink, his oceanic eyes take in everything I'm trying so hard to hide. He knows. He knows I'm struggling with a panic attack, that I'm always struggling with them. He knows I want to take her offer and hide from Cyrus, that I'd do anything to avoid the feeling that I can't breathe, that I can't control my own body. And he knows if we do, it'll likely mean we end up living in some cave at the ass end of Alaska, wards on the walls to keep Cyrus from getting in just like the Bloodletter has. Or worse, we go on the run, and he'll have to use his gifts, chip away at his soul week after week, to keep us safe. But he doesn't mind. He's got me.

His eyes crinkle just a little at the corners, speaking without words that if this is what I want to do, if this is what I *need* to do, he's with me a thousand percent. This isn't a question of me giving up on myself, like with the giant fight, and needing my mate to give me a kick in the ass to dig deeper and keep going, to believe in myself as much as he does. No, this is Hudson supporting whatever decision I need to make for my mental health—and just like that, I take a deep breath, fill my lungs with the oxygen I didn't know I was denying myself, and my shoulders relax.

As if there was any doubt, he mouths, *I love you*. And I melt. I just melt.

I mouth back, *I know*, and he squeezes my hand, one corner of his mouth tipping up in a half smile.

My gaze flicks to Jaxon, standing next to a fat red chair, his jaw set, his eyebrows raised as if to ask, *Why aren't you demanding she tell you everything?* And Flint, slightly in front of him with his fists on his hips, weight on the balls of

his feet, ready to take on the Bloodletter again with his bare hands. Macy's hair that's like living flames, her eyes begging me to find out what happened to her mother at any cost. Even Mekhi and Eden have already assumed that of course I will want to hear how to defeat Cyrus, how to rescue the kids. They're both leaning forward, arms on their knees, eyes trained on the Bloodletter, ready to listen to whatever story she wants to tell us.

In fact, the only two people who've guessed I want to run away are Hudson and the Bloodletter. My gaze shifts to her swirling green eyes, and she has one eyebrow raised as she stares me down. She gave me a choice, but it's just as obvious she already knows which option I'll choose, and she's tired of me wasting her time.

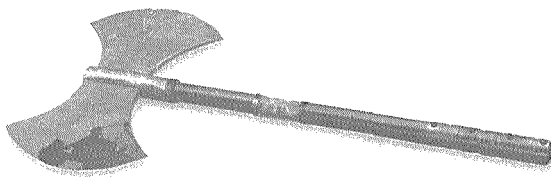
And she's right.

No matter how badly I want to run away right now, I won't. I may have a panic attack while she's talking, I may even need a good cry afterward, but that doesn't mean I won't do everything I can to save my people, save this world from Cyrus, prevent others from suffering.

"Well, child? Which is it to be?" the Bloodletter asks.

I take another deep breath, tilt my chin as I hold her gaze steady. "I'd like to know exactly how to kick Cyrus's butt back to whatever rock he crawled out from under. Tell me everything."

It's only slightly unsettling that the Bloodletter and my mate respond at exactly the same time with, "That's my girl."



“**L**ike all stories, it’s best if we start at the beginning.” She looks from one of us to another as she takes in our group. “In the beginning, two gods gave birth to twins, two daughters. One was the God of Chaos and the other the God of Order—”

“Wait,” I interrupt. “We’ve heard this story. What were their names?” My mind searches back to the story the Crone told us before Hudson and I went to prison, but I can’t recall their exact names.

The Bloodletter arches a brow. “You’ve heard the story of Cassia and Adria? Perhaps as a bedtime story?”

I shake my head. “No, a witch called the Crone told us recently. We had heard she built the prison Hudson and I were being sent to, and we went to her asking for a way out.”

Her brows slash down. “You went to my sister for help? And she *gave* it?”

“The Crone is the God of Order?” Macy squeaks. “But—she implied the God of Order was basically a bitch.”

“Adria is cunning, my dear,” the Bloodletter says to Macy. “If she told you the story, then she had a purpose. And I sincerely doubt it was to benefit me—or you. She positively hates all paranormal creatures, hence why she built the prison to keep them locked away.”

Okay, that actually makes more sense. I glance at Hudson, and he shrugs. I can’t believe we never made that connection. Then something occurs to me. “But the Crone is a witch. How can she hate paranormals if she *is* one?”

The Bloodletter laughs without humor. “Adria is no witch. She’s a god, same as I am. I’m sure it tickles her to no end that paranormals are coming to *her* for help, believing she is one of them.”

“But she did help us,” I insist. “Without her flowers, Hudson and I would still be in prison.”



“And she did this for free, did she?” the Bloodletter asks.

“Well, not entirely, of course. Nothing in this world is free. Especially nothing of value.” I paraphrase the Crone’s words. “I was required to owe her a favor, at a time of her choosing, in return.”

The Bloodletter leans forward, her green eyes piercing straight through me. “Listen to me carefully, Grace. You cannot do this favor for her, no matter what it is. Adria has wanted only one thing since we were children, to see the death of every paranormal creature, and she would sleep with the devil himself to achieve this goal. And did.”

My pulse trips at her words, but I think back on my conditions to the favor she can ask. “I insisted on caveats before I would agree. She cannot ask me to do anything that will harm anyone, either directly or indirectly.” Surely this is enough to ensure my favor cannot be used against anyone.

The Bloodletter shakes her head, pity turning down the corners of her mouth. “There is always a loophole in magic, my dear. Always.” She smooths the blanket Jaxon brought her on her lap. “But perhaps I should finish my story first.”

I nod, eager now to hear how the Bloodletter will tell the tale of these two gods versus the Crone. Hudson voices the same thought but with considerably less diplomacy. “By all means. A catfight between two sisters in which the fate of all paranormals hangs in the balance feels like something the rest of us should definitely know more about.”

The Bloodletter sighs. “You really are a cheeky bastard, aren’t you?” She turns to me. “Are you sure this is the mate you want? I could smite him for you, if you like, free you up to find another.”

Hudson stiffens next to me, but there’s no fire behind the Bloodletter’s words. In fact, if I’m not mistaken, there’s a fair bit of approval in my choice glowing in her eyes. “He’s fine for now, thanks,” I reply with a wink at him.

Which makes Hudson roll his eyes and mutter under his breath, “Definitely related.”

The Bloodletter continues. “I’m sure my sister told you that the God of Order was so angered by my creation, she poisoned the Cup of Life, which took my godhood and trapped me on earth as a demigod. Which of course trapped her as well, as what happens to one must happen to the other.” We all nod. “Angered even more that she was now stuck here in a world of paranormals, watching her humans die before her very eyes, she set upon her agenda of wiping all paranormals from the face of the earth. She built prisons for your kind, prisons with unbreakable curses where no one is ever set free. She trained hunters and

equipped them with all they'd need to kill each species." She turns to Flint. "And the hunters were successful. So successful, they helped humans hunt dragons to near extinction, if I remember correctly, which is why I helped create the Dragon Boneyard so you could at least honor your dead."

Flint's eyes widen as his eyebrows shoot up. "*You* created our sacred Boneyard? I thought the witches did that through a pact. At least, that's what we're taught in school."

The Bloodletter shakes her head. "I have done a great many things to protect your kind, which is why it bothers me to no end that you worship a pile of gold instead." Her gaze slides to Jaxon, and a softness settles in her features. "But I suppose I will get over it soon enough now that I have a dragon in the family."

Dragon in the family? She must be referring to Jaxon's dragon heart, although I wouldn't necessarily call him a dragon.

She turns back to me and continues. "It was a dark time, living among you, watching my sister and her hunters chase you down, force you into the shadows. And so we waged war against the humans. If they wouldn't let you into the light, we would drag them into the shadows with us. I taught vampires how to grow stronger"—she holds Hudson's gaze—"and how to develop gifts. I took charge of our armies...and I showed no mercy."

With a wave of her hand, we're suddenly surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of creatures and humans charging at each other on a massive field. Fierce battle cries, metal slashing against metal, and the screams of the dying, even the pitiful sobs of the wounded crushed under the heavy bodies of the dead toppling onto them all mix in a terrifying symphony of war that chills my blood. And in the center of the melee is a much younger Bloodletter, outfitted in black from head to toe, two vicious triple-bladed and double-sided knives clenched in her hands as she slices through her enemies like butter. Dozens of humans charge her with their swords raised, and she fades, ducks, flips, twists—and with each graceful dodge, her elegant knives arc through the air with deadly precision and slice into muscle and tendon. One by one, they fall. Piles and piles of bodies lay at her feet. And her face and clothes are drenched in their blood.

"*Bloodletter*," I whisper.

"Yes, I was given that horrible name for my relentless hunger for the blood of humans." She waves her hand, and the horrid scene disappears. "But not everyone could stomach the killing, the bloodshed, and our own factions began to disintegrate, to side with the humans. We ended up losing the First Great War two thousand years ago, and we tried to go home and regroup, find some

semblance of a life in those of us left. But my sister saw her dream within sight now, and she refused to allow you any peace from her hunters. With our kind nearly extinct, I knew I had to do something. So I trapped myself in here, sacrificed myself—which meant I trapped my sister, too. It was the only way to stop her, or at least slow her down.”

The Bloodletter pauses, and the emptiness in her eyes is replaced by something else, something almost *proud*. “And then I knew I had to give you a gift that would help you survive. A gift so precious, even I didn’t know the full extent of what I had done at first.” She pauses again. “With as much of my godhood as I could draw, I created the magic of mating bonds. I thought if you were at least mated, you would have a better chance of survival, a better chance to see a hunter coming at you if you were not alone.”

I gasp. “Is that how you knew how to create a fake mating bond between Jaxon and me?”

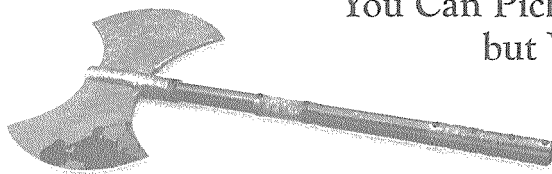
Everyone except Hudson and Jaxon gasps at that statement, and my stomach sinks. I blurted out Jaxon’s private business without thinking, something I had no idea if he wished to remain a secret or not, and I feel awful. I twist in my seat to catch his gaze and mouth, *I’m sorry*. He tosses me a half smile, and I know he forgives me, but I want to say more or at least offer him a hug in apology. And I would, if Flint wasn’t staring at Jaxon like he’s never seen him before—and Jaxon turns to stare right back. And now all I want to do is face forward again and not be a fly on the wall for whatever is going on between those two.

“Of course, dear,” the Bloodletter confirms. “But let’s not get ahead of ourselves just yet.” Her gaze turns to the fire, her eyes swirling as if caught in the flames. “Magic has a funny way of finding its place in the universe, seeking its purpose. And once unleashed, it takes on a life of its own.”

An eerie quiet settles in the room, the crackling fire with its random hisses and pops the only sound, as no one wants to interrupt the Bloodletter again. It’s as though we can sense that what she’s about to tell us next is going to change everything.

“And my plan worked. Paranormals were again learning to thrive, just starting to step back into the light, which only escalated my sister’s anger toward your kind. And her vengeance knows no bounds.” The Bloodletter’s gaze snaps to mine, and a chill skates along my spine.

“So our parent created gargoyles, and that was the beginning of the end.”



You Can Pick Your Friends  
but You Can't Pick  
Your Poison

I blink. “But I thought gargoyles were created to bring balance? I thought we were good?”

“You were. Or at least, that was the hope of your king as he went from faction to faction, securing peace treaties and alliances. The last faction he sought out, the one he felt would be the hardest to convince, was of course the Vampire Court.”

Hudson sneers, “Yeah, I can’t see dear old Dad ever agreeing to stay at home and knit a sweater when he could be slaughtering someone.”

The Bloodletter holds Hudson’s gaze. “Yes, well, I suppose that’s true. But that’s not who the gargoyle king sought out. Your father was not the ruler then. I was.”

My eyebrows nearly reach my hairline. “*You* were the vampire queen?”

“I was,” she says. “Until the gargoyle king and I shook hands upon first meeting.”

Understanding blooms in my chest. “You were mated.”

The Bloodletter’s entire demeanor shifts. Gone is the ruthless vampire with bodies hanging in the corner. Instead, a smile turns up the ends of her mouth. “Imagine my surprise to discover I had a mate, that my own magic would find me again. Or that I would ever feel like a schoolgirl with a crush, giddy and in love.”

The Bloodletter sighs. “It seems only yesterday that Alistair and I were dancing through the marble halls of the Gargoyle Court. There was such laughter there then. Such joy and power and grace.”

She pauses at the word “grace” and smiles at me. Then, with a wave of her hand, the cave around us transforms into a giant banquet room, filled with women in brightly colored gowns and men in richly shaded tunics.

The room itself is pristine, made almost entirely of white stone—white marble floor, white alabaster columns with gargoyle faces carved into the smooth

surface, and white stone walls covered in nature tapestries spun in shades of cream and white with gold thread. My favorite is a white waterfall strewn with golden flowers as it spills down a rocky mountain.

Running most of the length of the room—right down the center—is a huge banquet table loaded with the most delicious-looking dishes. Roasted chickens. Grilled fish. Platters of baked breads and cheese. Huge plates of fruit—peaches, grapes, apples, pomegranates, figs, and some others that I’ve never seen before.

People crowd around the table, eating and drinking and laughing. At the end of the hall is a small area where musicians play and people dance. Right in the center of the floor is the Bloodletter, dressed in an elaborate crimson gown that trails along the floor behind her like a river of velvet. Rubies drip from her ears, throat, and the tiara on her head as she laughs up at Alistair, who is twirling her around the small dance floor. He’s dressed in a white tunic embroidered with gold thread, and on his head is a crown that looks exactly like the one currently tattooed on my hand.

“The Court is beautiful,” Macy breathes as we all watch the party unfold in front of our fascinated eyes.

“This was our mating ceremony,” the Bloodletter says, and there’s something in her voice—something in her eyes—that has me watching her instead of the scene playing out in front of me. “It was an incredible day. Everyone came to celebrate with us, and they stayed for three days. It was the first time I’d ever seen so many gargoyles up close—the first time anyone outside the Gargoyle Court had, I think.

“Including your father.” She turns to Jaxon and Hudson. “He began plotting their demise that night. We just didn’t know it yet.”

She closes her fist, and the scene disappears. As it turns to darkness, a violent thunderstorm fills the room. Lightning cracks, thunder booms, rain pounds until we’re all soaked to the skin. But it passes as quickly as it came on, and soon the fire is blazing in the hearth again, drying us just as quickly. And the Bloodletter is standing in the center of the room dressed in the same red dress she celebrated her mating in as snowflakes gently float down from the ceiling.

“I believe it was during our mating ceremony that Cyrus initially became jealous. He was my first lieutenant, and he was committed to the idea of paranormals one day ruling the human world. A fanatic, even, which of course was of value to me when I was also focused on war. But from the minute I was mated to the gargoyle king, I had a different agenda entirely. I wanted what Alistair wanted, peace. And Cyrus felt betrayed.

“He convinced the Circle that I was no longer loyal to the Vampire Court, that my allegiances were now aligned with the Gargoyle Court, and he was not entirely wrong. So I stepped aside, named him my successor, and moved to the Gargoyle Court. By now, I was pregnant with our first child, and I wanted to spend every moment of every day with my darling mate.”

I could understand that. I squeeze Hudson’s hand. I never want to be apart from my mate, either.

She continues. “But being Cyrus, he couldn’t rest until he’d figured out how to break the treaty and continue to kill humans. And that meant he’d have to destroy the Gargoyle Army first.”

The wind picks up with her words, blowing the snow into flurries all around us. *Just another illusion*, I tell myself. Her breeze whips through my hair, slaps it against my cheeks hard enough to hurt. I glance over at Hudson with a kind of *what the fuck* expression, but as I do, I realize that the wind is so powerful that it’s managed to mess with even his indestructible hairstyle, so that pieces of hair block his eyes as they whip against his cheeks.

It’s the first time I’ve ever seen him like this other than when he gets out of the shower before bed, but our relationship is so new that even those times are rare. It makes him look younger somehow, more vulnerable, and for the first time, I wonder if his Brit Boy pompadour is a deliberate choice. If it’s his armor the same way Flint’s grin used to be his. The way Jaxon’s *always has to be in charge* personality hides his vulnerabilities.

It’s a strange thought to be having right now, but it shakes me nonetheless. I mean, I know Hudson has vulnerabilities. Everyone does. But even at his softest with me, he seems so powerful. So in control. So strong.

Shoving my curls out of my eyes—and mouth—I raise my voice over the vicious howl of the wind and ask, “What did Cyrus do to destroy the Gargoyle Army?”

Maybe it’s the wrong question to ask—I actually don’t know what the right questions are—but this seems like a better bet when it comes to finding out as much information as possible as quickly as possible.

“He poisoned them.”

“Poisoned them?” It’s the last thing I expect to hear, and it sounds more than a little far-fetched to me. “But there were thousands of them. How could he possibly have poisoned them all?”

“Magic, of course,” she answers, the wind dying back down. “Back then, Cyrus had the ability to control energy. He could move currents in any direction,

currents of energy or even magic. My sister, also wanting the gargoyles gone so she could finish wiping out all paranormals, betrayed me one final time. She told Cyrus that gargoyles could communicate telepathically—which means there is a magical thread connecting them all—and she gave him the poison she had used against me in the Cup of Life. A god-killer poison. They didn't stand a chance."

She pauses, her eyes glassy with unshed tears, and my stomach twists. Whatever she's about to say is going to be awful, worse than awful, if it can make *her* cry.

"Adria bound Cyrus's gift to the poison, allowing him to drink it without being harmed himself. He then bit a gargoyle too young to defend himself properly, and Cyrus used his vampiric ability to push the poison along that magical thread—"

"And poisoned the entire Army at once," I finish for her as horror slithers through me.

"Every single gargoyle, even the children," she repeats, her eyes filled with a mixture of swirling power and unfathomable despair.

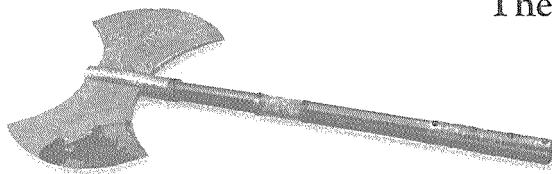
"And that's why there are no gargoyles left?" Macy asks as she gets up and joins me next to the Bloodletter, her hand reaching for my free one and squeezing. "Because Cyrus killed them all?"

"He didn't kill them," the Bloodletter tells us. "Oh, he tried—but he didn't consider one thing."

As I take in the firm set of the Bloodletter's jaw, the piercing gaze that captures my own, I know exactly what Cyrus overlooked. "He underestimated *you*."

She smiles back at me, a smile of pure rage. "He forgot I am not merely a vampire. I am the God of Chaos."





## The Thanksgiving Guest List Just Got Chaotic

“**B**ut I thought he *did* destroy them,” Eden chimes in for the first time. “That’s why Grace’s existence was so unexpected. Because she is the only gargoyle to be born in a thousand years.”

“That doesn’t mean the ones who existed before her are dead,” the Bloodletter says.

“We saw the Court,” Jaxon objects. “There’s no one there. It’s completely destroyed.”

“Gone doesn’t mean dead.” The Bloodletter locks eyes with Hudson. “You should know that better than anyone.”

“Cyrus’s gift isn’t his eternal bite?” Hudson asks, one eyebrow raised.

The Bloodletter rolls her eyes. “Eternal bite. Your father always was dramatic. No, that’s not his gift at all. That bite is the poison still in his body.”

Something about this story is bothering me. “How did Cyrus manage to poison the gargoyles, or even channel the poison, considering magic doesn’t work on them?”

“Channeling energy is something gargoyles were meant to do. You’re natural conduits. Cyrus simply used that gift against you. And as I said, the poison is meant to kill a god, so it’s no stretch to use it to kill a mere gargoyle.” She’s staring at something over my shoulder now, lost in thought.

Flint breaks his glowering silence. “But his bite didn’t kill Grace. She’s just fine.”

The Bloodletter’s gaze whips back to mine. “You’ve been bitten by the vampire king? When?” There’s an urgency in her voice that I’ve never heard before.

“A couple of months ago.” My hand goes instinctively to the small scar on my neck that I usually try really hard not to think about. “After I became gargoyle queen.”

Her eyes begin to glow the same bright emerald green as the string that



binds us together.

“Then he must know who you are now, must have tasted your magic.”

Not gonna lie, I cringe at the visual of Cyrus “tasting” me. Seriously gross.

“Is that why—” I was about to ask if that’s why he wanted to send Hudson to prison, hoping I’d join him and get me off the chessboard, but I break off as she fades to me in a blink, reaches out, and pulls me to my feet. It’s not the first time she has touched me since I met her, but it is the first time I can literally feel the power inside her.

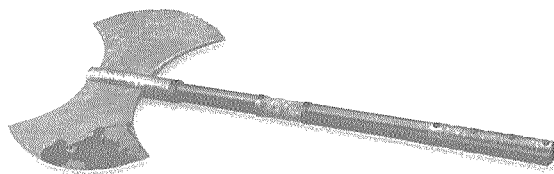
It’s right under the surface—roiling, seething, looking for an outlet. I can feel it reaching for my own power, feel it winding itself around me as it tries to find an opening—

I slam a mental wall down between us so fast and hard that it has the Bloodletter stumbling back.

“I hoped your godhood hadn’t grown enough yet for him to sense it,” she whispers after a moment. “But unfortunately, it has. Time is of the essence now. He will stop at nothing to get his hands on you, Grace. Nothing. You’re both the key to his destruction—and to his most fervent desire for more power.”

As though she hasn’t freaked me out enough, she leans closer and says, “*Only* the Gargoyle Army can save you now. If you can be saved at all.”

## Try to Seed It My Way



“**W**here is the Gargoyle Army?” I ask on a tremulous breath, choosing to ignore her ominous threat about Cyrus entirely. I mean, no kidding he wants to get his hands on me for some reason I’m not going to like. Katmere is dust because of that. Instead, I focus on the other part of her warning—the part that implies the Army *can* be saved. I’m almost too afraid of the answer. I want to believe they’re alive, that there are others like me out there, that Cyrus didn’t kill an entire species, but it seems unlikely that the Bloodletter was able to keep them hidden for a thousand years.

“Why, I froze them in time, of course,” she replies, and I’ve got to admit, I wasn’t expecting that answer.

I turn toward Hudson, my breath coming fast as another thought occurs to me. And it must also occur to Hudson, because his eyes widen and he says, “Alistair took you to the frozen Gargoyle Court.”

A smile overtakes my face. “They’re alive, Hudson. They’re really alive.”

And suddenly, everything seems possible.

If the Gargoyle Army is alive, my friends and I just need to find a loophole to save them. And if we can save them, we can get the kids back. We can defeat Cyrus once and for all. And maybe Hudson and I won’t have to hide in a cave at the ass end of Alaska, for the rest of our lives.

“Can you unfreeze them now?” I ask, eager to show everyone the amazing Court, how hard the gargoyles train for battle.

But the Bloodletter shakes her head. “Not until we can cure them. I gave Alistair’s lieutenant a God Stone, which prevents the poison from working further as long as they remain frozen in time. Remove the God Stone, and the poison will still kill them in the frozen Court, only more slowly. But unfreeze them entirely, and they’ll have mere hours to live unless they turn to solid stone and remain that way forever.”

Sadness crashes into me, churning my stomach, and I reach out for Hudson to help keep me on my feet, but he's already ten steps ahead of me, his arms snaking around my waist, looping in front of me and pulling my back snug against his chest.

"It's okay," he soothes in my ear. "We'll find a way to save them."

I close my eyes and let his warmth, his strength, seep into my shaking body. I need to focus, to think. There's always a loophole in magic. That's what the Bloodletter said earlier. We just need to find it.

The Bloodletter adds, "There might be a way to save them without an antidote. Though I'm not sure it will work, since Grace's magic is still growing."

Hudson rolls his eyes. "Because that's how all good ideas begin, by pointing out how shitty they are."

Everyone ignores his sarcasm.

I know I do. He's rattled, furious. The idea of him putting himself at risk makes me feel exactly the same way. But I can't just leave the Gargoyle Army trapped in time forever.

Hudson growls low in his chest. "I have a suggestion. Can't we just kill the wanker? Isn't it his ability pushing the poison through their bodies?"

"I like the kill-Cyrus plan," Jaxon admits. "If we have a chance to take the asshole out, I think we should do it."

"Not until you free the Gargoyle Army," the Bloodletter hisses. "I froze the Army to save them, which trapped his power to channel energy with them, but it's still tied to him...which means he is as immortal as the frozen Army. Have you never wondered why no one has killed him yet? Why I haven't killed him myself instead of hiding out in a damn ice cave?"

I glance around the harsh, cold room and agree. No one would ever willingly live here, especially not without their mate.

"What's your really bad idea?" I ask, even as I brace for the pushback from Hudson. Normally, he's the first one to tell me I can do anything I need to, but when it comes to his father, he tends to get a little more overprotective of all of us. Not that I blame him. Cyrus is a monster, no doubt. But that's just one more reason why I have to save the Gargoyle Army. As brave and powerful as I think my friends are, we're no match for the vampire king on our own.

By now, the rest of the Order and Dawud must be at the Vampire Court. What if they discover Cyrus really is draining the kids of their magic? What if he's already killed some of them? If we have any hope of stopping Cyrus, we're going to need an army. Not to mention, yeah, we just need to free them because

they're my people.

I glance down at the ring Alistair gave me. He named me his successor for no other reason than I'm his granddaughter. Shame burns my cheeks as I realize I haven't earned the right to be their queen. I'm not even sure I can, but I can at least start with trying to free them.

"A bad idea is better than leaving my people frozen in time one day more," I say.

"Grace." Hudson turns me to look at him, and for the first time maybe ever, I see fear in his deep blue eyes. Not for himself but for me. And I get it. But we don't have a choice.

"I'll be fine," I assure him, then face the Bloodletter again. "Okay. What do I have to do?"

The Bloodletter snaps her fingers, and all of the furniture, the fireplace, everything disappears. Somehow, without those trappings of home, I'm reminded how lonely and isolated the Bloodletter has lived for a thousand years. The icy cave is cold. Sterile. Soulless. And my sympathy for the ancient vampire inches up another millimeter. Not enough to warrant a Christmas card, of course, but a little higher than before.

"Follow me." She walks to the center of the room, and I can't help the shiver that races down my spine. "You mentioned you've seen a *string* that reminds you of me, yes?"

I nod. "A bright green string."

"Your demigod string." And when the Bloodletter says it like that, it's both an answer and a threat. "When my baby was born, Cyrus came for her. I knew I had to protect her, so I built this prison in the ice to stop him." She motions to the icy walls around us. "But he had already trapped your grandfather and poisoned the other gargoyles, and I knew I couldn't afford to believe I might not also be defeated. So I took steps to protect her from the king."

She motions with her hands for everyone else to step back against the walls, to give us room to do, well, whatever she has planned for us to do. Hudson hesitates, keeps a tight hold on my hand.

"Together," he says when I look at him questioningly. "You may have to do this, but that doesn't mean you have to do it alone. I'm going to be right here holding on to you the whole time. And if things get bad, you just keep holding on right back. Deal?"

My heart melts, because no matter what happens—no matter how many problems or rabid vampire kings try to come between us—Hudson is my mate.

And that is everything.

“Deal,” I tell him, squeezing his hand one more time before turning back to the god who got us into this mess. “What happened to your child?”

“I hid her. From Cyrus. From the world. From even myself,” she replies. Her eyes grow sad as she makes a series of complicated movements with her hands, sometimes slashing harsh lines, other times curving through the air in giant dips and twists. After she finishes one rather beautiful series of gestures, a glowing symbol appears in front of her, and everyone gasps. She turns slightly and makes similar but different movements.

Another symbol appears, the glowing light dancing off the walls of the ice cave like tiny flickering white flames. There’s something about this symbol, two V’s on their side, that looks familiar, but I can’t quite place it.

She turns and begins another symbol as she continues her story. “I took my baby’s godhood as well as her gargoyle—her *strings*—and I pressed them into a small frozen seed, bound it to my magic, and hid her power deep inside where even she couldn’t find it, to be passed down from mother to daughter, for generations if necessary. Like magic calls to like magic, so I knew one day she would return to me. She might be my daughter, or my granddaughter, or my great-great-granddaughter, but one day, my magic would come back to me, the same as the mating bond magic found me.”

“Dayum.” Hudson draws the word out. “Does that mean your daughters never knew who they really were or what they were capable of? Their entire lives?”

I know I spent most of my life not knowing I was a gargoyle, but now I can’t imagine not having that part of myself anymore. Maybe if I’d never known, I wouldn’t know to miss it, but I can’t help feeling sad for my mother and grandmother and the other women in my maternal line, so many generations of women never realizing how much power they really had hidden inside them.

“Not until my magic found me,” she agrees. “It’s the only way I could be sure Cyrus would never find my daughter before she was ready. When your mother and the coven came to me, asking for my help in creating a gargoyle, I recognized her immediately. I agreed to help, but I didn’t gift them with a gargoyle like they thought. Your parents were already pregnant with you the old-fashioned way, and being gargoyle was in her lineage. But I released the magic...and for the first time in a thousand years, Grace, it was free to grow. In you.” Her eyes narrow for a second on me. “And by the looks of it, it’s still got a lot of growing to do.”

She shakes her head, goes back to waving her hands in the air. “I always knew my daughter would be the key to freeing everyone. The Army. Alistair.

Everyone. Only another gargoyle would be able to hear Alistair and free him. Only another gargoyle who was also a demigod could ever travel to the frozen Court. I can freeze the Court, but a gargoyle could also travel there. And only a demigod who is also connected to the gargoyle magic thread might be able to use her magic to save them all.”

While she’s been talking, I can’t help but notice there are more than a dozen symbols floating in the air now, almost forming a complete circle around the three of us, our friends still pressed against the ice walls outside the circle.

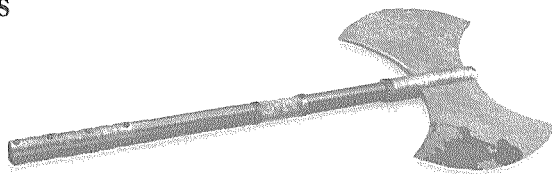
“How can my demigod string save the Army?” I ask, and a part of me really hopes it doesn’t include actually touching the string. The last time I tried to hold my green string, well, Hudson became the proud owner of a slightly damaged lighthouse.

“Well, if we had an antidote, it would be easier.” The Bloodletter makes one last swoosh through the air, and the remaining symbol flares to life and completes the circle. Then she pivots to me, her eyes lit with diabolical pleasure, and says, “But we might be able to use your demigod strength to drive the poison out.”

She pinches the forefinger and thumb of her hands together, then draws them apart, and a thin, glowing string appears stretched between her hands. “Imagine you have a string connecting you and the Army.” She ties a knot in the middle of the string. “And on the other end of this string is Cyrus, using his ability to control magical currents to send a poison from inside his body down this string.” As she says this, the end of the string in her right hand begins to glow red, the crimson light moving along the string, around and around through the knot, and all the way to the other end of the string.

“If you were to use your natural gargoyle ability to channel magic, you might be able to use your demigod strength to push the poison in the other direction.” The crimson glow begins to recede, traveling back across the string, around the knot, and to the hand where it originated. “If you’re strong enough, you just might be able to push the poison out of every gargoyle—and shove it back down Cyrus’s throat.”

## All the Strings Attached



The Bloodletter continues. “With Cyrus’s ability no longer linked to the frozen Army, he will lose his immortality. And finally, finally I can leave this cave and teach that man what happens when you piss off a god for a thousand years.”

Hudson bristles. “But when she touches the string connecting every gargoyle to her, won’t the poison just follow the thread back to Grace, still being pushed by Cyrus’s ability?”

The Bloodletter shakes her head. “It already has.”

*What?* I pat my hands against my stomach and arms, testing to see if I feel ill, which I know makes no sense. But hey, someone just told me I was infected with a magical poison. I’m patting *something* to make sure I’m okay.

Hudson must be thinking the same thing because he runs his hands up and down my arms as well, pulls me close.

“I feel fine,” I assure her.

“Obviously,” she says, as though that was the silliest thing she’s heard all year. “I was poisoned before you were born, and you are my progeny. Therefore, you inherited some of my immunity. Hence why Cyrus’s bite didn’t kill you, either.”

Okay, well, that only makes sense *after* she says it. I stand by that.

“Now, if your mate can take his hands off you for at least five minutes, come here and let’s get started.” She motions to a space in the center of the circle.

“No chance,” Hudson replies, picking up my hand again and walking with me to the center. “Where she goes, I go.”

I expect the Bloodletter to make an obnoxious comment, but she surprises us both with, “Yes, I remember those early days,” and her gaze focuses on something over my shoulder for a minute before she shakes her head.

I glance at our friends outside the magical circle, but something seems off about them. Jaxon is standing beside Mekhi and Flint, but his hand is half raised

as if about to point at something. Eden is beside Macy, and they're leaning close, like they're talking quietly, but neither is speaking.

I'm about to ask the Bloodletter what's going on when she says, "Everything and everyone outside this circle is frozen in time. I won't be able to keep this up for long, though, so we best hurry."

Hudson's eyebrows shoot up, and he blurts out, "*Everyone* outside the circle is frozen? Like the whole world?"

"It's more that time is frozen than anyone is actually frozen. We can't risk Grace accidentally unfreezing the Army. Therefore, I've given her room to work here in the space between moments." She arches one brow at me. "But that moment is shrinking every second we waste. Now, come here."

I hustle to the middle of the circle, and she gives me some basic instructions on what to do next, but in the end, it apparently all boils down to, "See what feels right."

I want to laugh, because what feels right is packing up my friends and getting as far away from here as fast as we possibly can. But since that isn't an option—why is that never an option?—I grit my jaw and dive in. I close my eyes and run through her instructions in my head.

I'm supposed to find the connection to all gargoyles inside me with one hand and reach for my green string with the other—then hold on like hell and push. She mentions it should be easy to find the right direction to push the poison, as it'll be stronger in only one direction and that's closest to where it originated—Cyrus.

I know what Alistair feels like when he talks inside my head, but I have no idea how to try to form that connection with any other gargoyle—especially since Alistair was the one who formed it with me. Still, I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and open myself to whatever is out there as I try desperately to see what thousands of other gargoyles might look like.

Thousands of points of light.

That's the answer that comes through the darkness and the fear buried deep in the pit of my stomach. Against the blackness of my closed eyes, thousands of pinpricks of light start to appear. Like stars over the ocean in the middle of the night, the dots of light go on as far as I can see—and as far as my consciousness can reach.

The sheer magnitude of the numbers is daunting, and there's a part of me that doesn't even want to try. There are too many stars—too many souls—I have to try to reach. There's no way I can get them all.

But then, that's what Cyrus is counting on. It's what he always counts on



in these untenable situations. That I'll get scared and give up before I ever try. But I've never done that before, and I'm not going to do it now, no matter how Sisyphean the task in front of me seems.

So, not knowing what else to do, I reach out and try to scoop a handful of stars out of the sky.

It doesn't work—big surprise.

Still, I try again and again, but each time I reach for them, they get farther away, like they have no desire to be touched by me. Or worse, like they have no desire to be saved.

The thought freaks me out more than a little. After all, I'm going on faith here, believing what the Bloodletter tells me even though she's been less than forthcoming—less than honest—before. Is she lying again? Trying to get me to do something I shouldn't because it serves her agenda?

The idea pulls me out of the zone, or whatever it is, and the stars begin to fade. At first, I let them—what makes me think I can do this anyway?

But then the voice inside me—no, not *the voice*, Alistair—says, *Hold, Grace. Hold, hold, hold.*

I don't know what I'm supposed to hold, considering the stars keep slipping through my fingers like so much dust, but he is so insistent—*Hold, Grace, hold*—that I can't just give up. And I definitely can't walk away. Not if I ever want to face him, or myself, again.

So I do the only thing I can. I hold even more tightly to Hudson and lean forward in my mind and scoop a giant armful of stars toward me with both hands.

This time it works...sort of. The stars don't retreat from me like they had been, but as they slip from my fingers and tumble across the inky blackness, they grow bigger, longer. They thin out until they don't look like stars at all. Instead, they appear as thousands and thousands of gossamer strings of light, stretched out in front of me. And with a deep breath, I reach out and wrap one of my arms around the entire curtain of light.

But suddenly the thin strings are vibrating in my grasp. Softly at first and then harder and harder, until electric shocks sizzle their way up my arm and it feels like my shoulder is going to be wrenched from the socket.

It seems like more proof that they don't want me to touch them—don't want me to help them—so I start to let the threads go. But the second I ease back, Alistair's voice comes through loud and clear in my head. *Grace, you must hold on.*

He sounds like the gargoyle king now, not like the Unkillable Beast, and I

listen to him instinctively. I hug the strings tighter to my chest, and I hold on to every single one of them despite the electric shocks pumping through my body.

The pain is intense, nearly overwhelming, and I know I won't be able to hold them forever—or even much longer. So I take a deep breath, try to breathe through the agony, and use my other hand to reach for the green string that connects me to the Bloodletter. The green string that felt earlier like it connects me to the universe itself.

Hudson cries out when I drop his hand, but I don't have the energy to reassure him right now. Not when it's taking every ounce of energy I have to hold on to the strings of light, every ounce of willpower I have not to drop them and end the agony.

My knuckles brush against the green string, and everything inside me trembles. The pain doesn't go away, and time doesn't seem to stop the way it typically does when I brush against the string. I can hear Hudson calling my name, feel him reaching for me through the maelstrom of sensations tearing through me, but it sounds as though he is across a vast, empty field in my mind, and I cannot focus on him.

I push the need to answer him down, push him away—just for now—and focus on the green string that is right at my fingertips. There's a part of me that worries about holding it, a part of me that worries I might accidentally unfreeze the Army, like the Bloodletter suggested I might, and what if her circle doesn't prevent it?

But as I look more closely at the shimmering gargoyle strings, I realize I don't need to worry about unfreezing the poisoned Army. I recognize the Bloodletter's magic immediately. It's wrapped around every string, and it is immense. I don't think I could ever punch through that amount of power. Ever.

It's this thought that has me doing more than just brushing against my green string this time, more than just lightly clasping it in my hand. If I'm going to do this, I have to commit. Have to just do it.

And so I wrap my hand around my demigod string and hold it as tightly as I can—even as all hell breaks loose.

Lightning flashes, and a loud cracking sound fills the room above me. The wind from earlier returns like a hurricane, slamming into me so hard that I nearly topple over. Hudson saves me—I can feel his hands on my waist even through the storm and the wind and the green and silver strings—holding me in place as the world rages around me.

There's another flash of lightning, another loud crack. And for a second,

Remy's face flashes before my eyes.

He's grinning at me in a *what kind of mess have you gotten yourself into now* kind of way, and he looks so real that I can't help thinking he's actually here in front of me.

"Remy!" I call out, try to reach for him, but he disappears with a wink at the same moment the slender silver strings are ripped from my hand.

I make a grab for them, but they're already too far away, the wind blowing them out, out, out into the darkness around me.

"Grace!" Hudson yells from outside the inner world I'm standing in, and instinctively I turn toward him.

"Hudson?" I gasp as the wind continues to knock me around.

"Grace! There you are!" He grabs on to me, pulls me into his chest. "I was afraid we'd lost—"

He breaks off as yet another crack sounds above us.

"Let go!" he shouts to be heard above the noise.

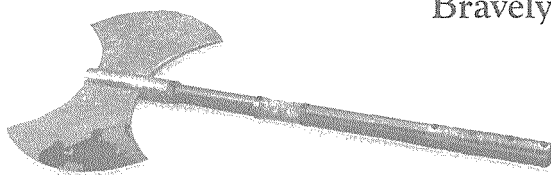
"Let go?" I repeat. "Of what?"

"The green string." Hudson's voice blends with Alistair's until they are both echoing inside me.

"Let go of the green string," they both say again.

So I do, more than a little surprised that I haven't done so already. And that's when hell really breaks loose.

## 49



## Bravely Going Where No Icicle Has Gone Before

The Bloodletter, Hudson, and I are still inside the circle created by the symbols, and while the wind is fierce, it seems to not exist outside the circle. But then an ominous crack echoes through the room.

“What the bloody hell was that?” Hudson growls.

I’m about to tell him I don’t have a clue when half the ceiling collapses right before my horrified eyes, the first falling rock destroying one of the floating runes, and our circle winks out instantly.

The wind I’ve been wrestling with ever since I tried to grab the gargoyle strings tears through the place, sending everyone spinning.

Macy goes flying and Mekhi reaches for her, but they both end up getting tossed and don’t stop until they crash hard into the wall where there’s usually a fireplace.

Flint’s legs get knocked out from under him, and he ends up flat on his butt.

Jaxon’s using his telekinesis to try to stop Eden from slamming into another wall, his own feet barely still under him.

Sharp icicles and heavy rocks rain down on our heads, and I’m convinced we’re all going to die. That my lack of control has somehow brought about a cave-in of such epic proportions that even a bunch of paranormals can’t survive it.

The thought has guilt and terror spiraling through me, has my knees going weak and panic crawling just under my skin. I do my best to fight it back—now is pretty much the worst possible time for a panic attack—but it’s not easy. Especially since I know I’m the one who caused it—me and my damn green string. I swear, I’m never touching it again if I can help it.

“It’s going to be okay,” Hudson whispers against my cheek as the world falls in around us. “This isn’t your fault.”

“It’s totally my fault,” I tell him even as I let myself sag against his hard chest and absorb his strength into my weak knees and too-tight throat.

"It's not," he insists. "No one knows how to ride a bike the very first time they get on one."

Part of me wants to tell him he's wrong, that wielding the green string is no different than any of the other strings I have deep inside me. But we both know that's not true. This green string—this demigod string—is different than anything I've ever touched before. Different than anything I've ever felt before.

It's that understanding that finally calms my frazzled nerves and freaked-out heart, and it's that understanding that lets me trust my knees to support me as I take a series of long, slow breaths. As I do, the tempest around me starts to calm, too. The ceiling stops cracking, ice stops falling, and flying debris settles back onto the ground.

As the dust—or in this case ice chips—settles, Hudson finally backs away from me. He must have disintegrated all the ice rocks that he saw raining down, as there are no large boulders around us, just an endless number of snowflakes floating gently to the ground. I step out from behind him to find the Bloodletter's cave in shambles. And Flint surrounded by several really large, really wicked-looking icicles behind Hudson.

"Oh my God!" I shout, running toward him. "I'm so sorry. Are you all right?"

"I have to say, Grace, you've got good aim. Thank God." He grabs hold of two of the largest icicles sticking in the ground around him and crushes them like it's nothing, then does the same to the remaining ones. "Any closer and I'd have had an icicle through some things that icicles should never, ever go through."

He says the last to make me laugh, but I'm too busy looking at the last ice dagger that missed his upper leg by mere inches. It makes me sick to realize how easily one of these could have impaled him, and it would have been my fault. My fault for not being able to control the power that comes with the green string and my fault for trying to when I knew I wasn't ready.

My thoughts must be all over my face, though, because Flint gently bumps his shoulder against mine. "Hey, it's okay," he tells me. "I'm tougher than I look—part and parcel of that whole dragon thing."

"Still, you could have—"

"But I didn't." He grins at me. "Besides, haven't you heard? Dragons are practically indestructible."

"'Practically' being the key word here," I say.

"Don't worry about it, Grace. I'm all good." I know I still look doubtful, because he crosses his heart and says, "I swear."

"To whom?" I shoot back. "The God of Chaos?"

He laughs. “Well, she knows I’d prefer to worship a tennis bracelet.”

I nearly choke on my laugh as my gaze bounces around the cave to see if the Bloodletter heard his comment.

“What do we do now?” Macy asks as Mekhi helps her up. Her eyes are wide, and her flame-colored hair is so tousled from the storm that it looks like literal flames sticking out from her head.

“Run?” I suggest, only half facetiously. I can’t see the Bloodletter being okay with the disaster I just made of her cave.

Surprisingly, though, she walks closer and says, “Some things you can’t run from, Grace. Your power is one of those things.”

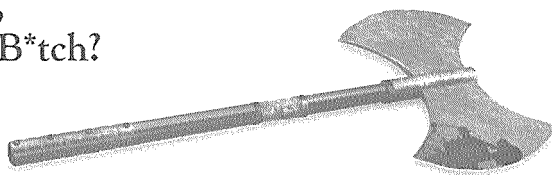
Then she waves a hand, and her sitting room is back the way it was—and in perfect condition.

“That’s it?” Eden glances around. “A little wave of your hand and everything is fine again?”

“That’s it,” the Bloodletter agrees as she surveys the room with satisfaction. “Though I do think ‘fine’ is a bit of an understatement, don’t you?”

“And here I was thinking it was a bit of an overstatement.” The words, said in a very pissy male voice I don’t recognize at all, ring through the cave. “Then again, you and I rarely see eye to eye on anything, do we, Cassia?”

## Life's a Beach, or Is It Just a B\*tch?



I shoot a quick glance at Hudson and Jaxon and mouth, *Cassia?* They both look as mystified as I feel—Jaxon shaking his head and Hudson giving a careless little shrug—before we all turn to face the owner of the voice that is still echoing through the Bloodletter's Cave.

As I do, I get my third shock in as many minutes. Because the voice belongs to a tall, ripped, *old* guy wearing bright teal board shorts, navy-blue snorkel fins, and a pair of sunglasses with bright blue lenses. He's also got full-on Einstein hair—silver, long, pushed back from his face in an *I don't give a shit* style—pierced ears, pierced *nipples*, and a tattoo sleeve of a staircase over water leading to an ornate, crumbling clock.

Oh, and if that isn't enough, he also looks *pissed as hell*.

"Don't blame me, Jikan," the Bloodletter—*Cassia?*—says in a bored voice. "It's hard to take you seriously when you insist on showing off your pierced nipples everywhere you go."

"I was at the *beach*," he answers, holding up the swimming mask and snorkel he's carrying as evidence. You know, in case we missed the board shorts and fins. "In *Hawaii*. For the first time in *five hundred years*."

"Well, don't let us keep you." She rolls her eyes. "I'm sure you have something simply riveting to do, like counting the grains of sand on the North Shore."

His eyes narrow. "I was snorkeling. There was coral. And beautiful fish. And a *dolphin*."

"In that case, I can see why you're upset." The Bloodletter gives him the most mocking smile I have ever seen. "You don't see that every day in the middle of the Sahara."

"No, I don't," he grinds out. "Which is pretty much my point."

"You should go on vacation more often, then," she tells him in an unflappable voice. "It would probably put you in a better mood."

“Yes, well, we can’t all lounge around all day in our own personal ice caves thinking up ways to screw the universe, now can we? Some of us have actual work to do.” He sneers at her as he walks closer. “Thanks to others of us.”

“No one asked for your help.” The Bloodletter starts toward him, and I’m reminded of two gunfighters in the Old West getting ready for a showdown. If they suddenly decided to pull out pistols and take aim at each other, I don’t think I’d be the least bit surprised.

“You may not have asked for it,” he says, looking around the newly immaculate room with a frown. “But you clearly need it.”

And with that, he reaches into the pocket of his electric-teal board shorts. I brace myself for him to pull out a weapon of some kind, and from the way Hudson steps in front of me, I know he’s thinking the same thing. Instead, Jikan pulls out an old-fashioned gold pocket watch. Like, an honest-to-god pocket watch with a chain and an ornate flip cover and everything.

“Oh, I get it,” Dawud says. “‘Jikan’ in Japanese means ‘time.’ Cool.”

“Enough talk.” Jikan holds up his watch. “Here’s an idea: why don’t we kill two questions with one stone?”

“I think you mean bird,” Flint suggests.

He turns to him with brows raised over the rims of his sunglasses. “Excuse me?”

“The saying,” he explains, and I’ve got to hand it to him, he doesn’t shrink an inch despite being the focus of Jikan’s very intimidating scowl. “It’s kill two birds with one stone, not two questions.”

“Of course it’s a dragon who thinks we should kill two birds. That’s your answer to everything. Although I don’t know what you’ve got against the poor creatures. They’re quite majestic, if you think about it.”

Flint’s eyes grow wide. “I wasn’t— I’m not saying we should kill—”

“Stop talking. It’s giving me a headache.” Jikan shifts his gaze back to me. “Are you quite finished?”

Finished? I haven’t even gotten started. “Why are you being so rude to everyone—”

“*Why* do you ask so many questions, little stone girl?” he counters. “For a piece of rock, you sure are inquisitive.”

“A piece of rock?” Jaxon repeats, sounding outraged on my behalf. “What the hell—”

“Shut it, goth boy. Nobody wants to listen to you, and no one has time for one of your temper tantrums anyway.”



I'm not sure if Jaxon chokes on his outrage or his own saliva, but either way, the sound he makes is a cross between a dying rhino and a hippo in heat. "Excuse me? What did you just say?"

Jikan narrows his eyes. "First of all, no. Second—"

"No what?" Jaxon demands.

"No, I won't excuse you. Obviously. And second, I never repeat myself." He shakes his head as he looks down at his pocket watch, muttering a veiled threat. "It really is ridiculous how fragile vampires are."

At this point, I'm pretty sure that if vampires could have a stroke, Jaxon would be having one right now. Hudson, on the other hand, looks half amused, half fascinated by Jikan's very obvious attitude problems. Then again, he could just be admiring his game. With Hudson, you never quite know what's going through his head.

"Who is this guy?" Jaxon demands.

"I don't know, but he just might be my new personal hero," Hudson says. "*Goth boy.*"

Jaxon turns to him with a *what the fuck* expression, but before he can say anything, Jikan continues. "Is question time done now, boys and girls? Because, riveting as your ignorance is, I have a luau to be at in an hour, and poi is my favorite. So let's get this show on the road, shall we?"

"What show is that, exactly?" I ask.

He lowers his sunglasses just enough that I can see his blazing mahogany eyes over the top. "The show where I fix what you and Cassia fucked up. I don't know why you feel the need to keep sticking your messy fingers in my elegant cake, Cassia, but I wish you would stop."

"Pie," Flint corrects him.

"3.14159 and so on until the end of, well, me," he answers distractedly. "Why?"

"No, I mean it's putting your fingers in my pie—"

Jikan looks totally affronted. "I can assure you, young dragon, that I have no desire to put my fingers in your teenaged pie or anywhere else."

Now Flint is the one who's choking. "It's an expression—"

"That's what they all say." He clears his throat. "Now, on to the business at hand. Fixing Grace's latest disaster."

"Latest?" I ask, choosing to ignore the fact that the word comes out sounding like a squawk. "Exactly how many disasters have there been?"

"You mean besides that giant one at the end of November?" he asks archly.

"What happened in November—" I break off as I figure out exactly what

he's referring to. "Wait a minute. Who are you?"

"The God of Time." Hudson manages to sound bored. "And I'm guessing he's pissed because *Cassia* over there—"

"You may *not* call me that," the Bloodletter grinds out.

Hudson doesn't acknowledge the interruption. Instead, he continues smoothly. "Just paused time for you, and then it blew up."

"It's a blow job, all right," Jikan says, shaking his head. "Lucky for you, I'm around to fix it. Cracks in time this big can let all kinds of nasty things through."

There's so much to unpack in that statement that I almost don't know where to start. Deciding to leave the blow-job comment alone—Mekhi is already laughing enough for the whole group of us—I focus on the important part of what he said. Namely, the crack in time. That I somehow must have caused.

Fan-freaking-tastic.

As my stomach twists itself into a giant knot, I tell myself to breathe. Just breathe. Because Jikan says he can fix whatever I broke, and I'm just going to have to believe him or I will lose it completely. I will never forgive myself if I accidentally unfroze the Gargoyle Army and they die.

Of course, if I'm going to believe him, it would help to know if he is who Hudson thinks he is. I hope so. I really, really hope so, because I'm not sure who else to trust to fix whatever mess the Bloodletter and I have made.

It's funny how last year I would have laughed at the idea of a god of time, and now I'm praying that he not only exists but that he's here in front of me right now. Of course, back then I thought vampires and werewolves only existed in fiction...

"Are you really the God of Time?" Macy beats me to the question, though, speaking up for the first time since Jikan appeared.

He sighs. "I prefer to be called the Historian, but yes, that is my official title."

Flint laughs. "You make it sound like a job."

"Which part of 'I'm on my first vacation in five hundred years' did you not understand?" he asks, once again holding up his scuba mask. "If working round the sundial since the beginning of time isn't job enough for you, I'm not sure what is.

"Speaking of which..." Jikan drops the scuba mask on the Bloodletter's coffee table and gestures toward the couch. "Sit down, will you, and stay out of my way. This can be delicate work."

"What exactly are you going to do?" I ask, glancing around the room in an effort to figure out what he's talking about. Everything looks normal to me, but it's obviously not if the God of Time—excuse me, the *Historian*—decided to

interrupt scuba diving to show up in an Alaskan cave.

For a minute, it looks like he's about to make a snarky comeback, but in the end, he just sighs and beckons us toward him.

Jaxon holds a hand out to stop the rest of us and walks forward first, which seems both brave and foolhardy at the same time. But he's barely taken two steps before the Historian rolls his eyes and say, "Not you. Her."

There's a part of me that hopes he's talking about the Bloodletter. But even before he lowers his glasses again and focuses those laser-brown eyes on mine, I know he's referring to me. I am the one who can apparently add "breaking time" to her repertoire of tricks, after all.

I reluctantly move forward and am not surprised at all to find Hudson right behind me.

"I just said—"

"I know what you said," Hudson answers mildly. "But you want her, you get me, too. We're kind of a package deal."

This time the Historian rips off his glasses and uses every ounce of ferocity he has—which is a lot—to stare Hudson down. Hudson, of course, stares right back for what feels like forever. And then out of the blue asks, "Do you smell toast?"

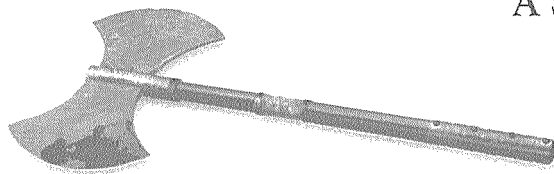
"Toast?" the Historian responds incredulously.

My mate gives his patented shrug. "I can't decide if you're having a stroke or just in a trance, so I figured I should check."

Surprise registers in the Historian's eyes, followed quickly by annoyance. And then he snaps his fingers.

And Hudson disappears.

## 51

A Stitch in Time  
Saves My A\$\$

S hock holds me—holds all of us—immobile. And then the Bloodletter says, “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“What did you do?” I demand. “Where’d he go?”

“Where the fuck is my brother?” Jaxon charges toward the Historian. “What did you do to him?”

“Nothing compared to what you did to him,” the Historian answers mildly. “Or are we all just supposed to forget about that?”

“You’re a real asshole, you know that?” Jaxon growls.

The Historian’s only response is to lift his hand, his thumb braced against his middle finger like he’s about to snap again.

Jaxon freezes, jaw working and hands clenched into fists.

“Stop!” I tell them—not just Jaxon and the Historian but our friends, too, all of whom are moving closer. Considering I wouldn’t put it past any of them to bum-rush the Historian, I place myself directly in front of him. And ask, “Can you please bring him back?”

He tilts his head to the side like he’s considering it for a second, then answers, “I don’t know. I kind of like it without him.”

He’s playing with me, like a cat with a mouse, and it pisses me off. Then again, everything about this trip is pissing me off. But I bite the inside of my cheek as I say as nicely as I can while it still comes across as a command, “Let him go, please.”

He lifts a brow. “You don’t actually think I’m going to take orders from a baby demigod like you, do you?”

“I guess that depends.”

“On what?”

I square my shoulders and shove the fear and panic down deep inside myself. After sending a quick prayer into the universe that I’m doing the right thing, I answer, “On whether or not you actually want to make it to that luau.”

And then I take a deep breath and grab on to my green string as tightly as I can.

A loud cracking sound tears through the room.

“Oh shit,” Flint mutters from behind me.

“Grace, stop!” Macy urges from behind me as well. “Don’t.”

But I hold on, my gaze locked with the Historian’s, and pray he can’t tell that holding my green string is freaking me out, filling my body with an energy I know all too well I have no idea how to control. This power scares the absolute hell out of me. As another ominous crack echoes around the room, the corners of my mouth start to turn up, and I realize this power doesn’t frighten me because of the destruction it causes—but because I like it. Which is altogether even scarier as fuck, if I’m being honest.

Thankfully, his eyes narrow on my growing smile, and then he snaps, and just like that, Hudson blinks back into existence.

“Oh my God.” I let go of the string in an instant. As I do, the cavern quiets, and I’ve never been so grateful for a luau in my life.

Hudson wraps an arm around me, and unlike the times when he was frozen and didn’t have any immediate clue that it had happened, this time he seems to know exactly what the Historian did. Strangely, he doesn’t seem upset by it at all. Instead, he’s wearing a huge grin on his face.

“Where—” I start to ask, but he cuts me off with a shake of his head and a quick press of his lips to my forehead.

Then, holding my hand, he turns to the Historian. “That was pretty cool, mate. Thanks for the ride.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be—” Jikan breaks off with a shake of his head. “Never mind. Let’s just get to work before your girlfriend opens a wormhole.”

“Can I do that?” I ask, horrified.

“Can she do that?” Hudson asks at the same time, only he looks intrigued. Which gets my back up in all kinds of ways. I don’t know what it is about this God of Time, but Hudson is way too interested in what he can do instead of worrying about what he can do *to us*.

“Just a little time-related humor,” the Historian tells us. Which isn’t an answer. “And no, she most definitely can’t.”

“So what did I break?” I ask to change the subject, moving closer to him despite the non-Alistair voice in the back of my head screaming at me to get as far away from him as I can manage. “And how are you going to fix it?”

Jikan is walking around the room now, staring up at the ceiling, which is once again in perfect condition—or, at least, in as perfect condition as the inside

of an ice cave can be—and I decide he isn’t going to answer me. But after coming back to the same corner four separate times, he calls me over.

This time I go alone, shooting Hudson a warning look when he tries to come with me. I’m not up for another dick-measuring contest right now.

“Do you see that?” the Historian asks, pointing up at the very top of the cave.

I squint, but all I see are ice and rock. “No.”

His sigh is disappointed. “Well, maybe next time.” He pauses to glare at me. “Not that I’m expecting there to be a next time.” Then he pulls his pocket watch back out.

“Wait!” I exclaim, searching the ceiling even harder. “What am I supposed to see?” I need him to tell me so that if anything like this ever happens again, I’ll know if I caused any permanent damage to the future or the present day.

“You either see it or you don’t,” he tells me with a shrug. “And if you don’t, there’s no way to teach you to see it.”

With that, he flips the cover on his pocket watch and holds the whole thing up. He’s taller than I am—again, not hard—so I can’t see the face of the watch. I can’t see anything, really, except a strange blue light that seems to emanate from the face of the pocket watch. It forms a circle around him and then a circle around us, growing bigger and bigger with each minute that he holds it open.

And then, when the circle is wide enough—when it encompasses all of us and the entire room—the Historian reaches in and grabs what looks to be a handful of light. And then he hurls it straight at the ceiling, at the spot he pointed out to me earlier.

I brace myself, expecting some kind of explosion or something—it feels like something is always exploding these days—but the only thing that happens is the blue light coats that entire portion of the ceiling before spreading farther and farther across the cave.

“That’s it?” Macy whispers. “That’s how you fix a crack in time? With some light?”

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” the Historian answers.

He snaps his fingers, and the largest pair of knitting needles I’ve ever seen appear in his hand. He snaps again, and Julia Michaels and Niall Horan’s “What a Time” starts echoing through the entire ice cave.

Hudson is on one side of me now and Macy is on the other. I look between both of them to see if they know what’s happening—the Historian definitely doesn’t seem like the pop-music type—but they both look as bewildered as I do. Especially when the chorus repeats itself in the middle of the song and the Historian starts bopping his head and singing along with his eyes closed—all while knitting the air in front of him at a superfast speed.

“Is everyone else seeing this?” Flint hisses out of the corner of his mouth. “Or has the Tylenol I’ve been taking made me delusional?”

“Tylenol doesn’t make you delusional.” Eden snorts.

“So this is real, then?” Flint looks gobsmacked.

“It’s something,” Mekhi says.

The Historian chooses that moment to open his eyes and finds us all staring at him. “What?” he asks as the song repeats the chorus in an endless loop. “It’s a bop.”

To prove it, he closes his eyes again and returns to moving his head back and forth in rhythm to the currently never-ending chorus. And while I like the song a lot—One Direction forever, baby—after hearing the chorus what feels like 311 times in a row, even Macy and I are ready to call uncle.

The Historian, however, is happily bopping along as he knits and knits and knits. There’s no yarn or anything else attached to the knitting needles, but he just keeps moving the tips of them back and forth in rhythm to the music until finally—right in the middle of the 312th repetition of the chorus, he just stops.

The music stops, too—thank God—as he holds up the knitting needles and proclaims, “Voilà!”

At first, I think he’s completely forgotten us, considering he’s been knitting nothing for more than five minutes as if we’re not even there, but then I see them: tiny, gossamer-thin threads floating through the light all around him. “What are those?” I ask, reaching forward so I can feel one against my fingertips.

But a quick rap of his knitting needles on my knuckles has me yanking my hand back. “Those are the strands of time,” he says, “untouched by baby-demigod hands.” He shoots me a look. “And they need to stay that way.”

“What strands?” Eden asks, leaning forward to get a better look. “I don’t see anything.”

“I don’t, either,” Macy agrees.

“They’re right there,” I tell them, pointing to several strands near us even as I take pains not to touch them. My knuckles still hurt from the first smack.

But my friends look baffled. Even Hudson shakes his head and says, “It looks like there’s nothing there to us, Grace.”

“But there is something there.” I rub my eyes, then take another look just to be sure the Historian isn’t putting me on. He’s not. The gossamer strands are right in front of us.

“Watch this,” the Historian says, spinning the knitting needles between his fingers like drumsticks.

“Always the show-off,” the Bloodletter tells him with a roll of her eyes.

He snorts. "Like you're one to talk."

And then he thrusts forward with a knitting needle, hooks one of the long panels of threads on the tip, and brings it up to whirl it around his head. He spins the panel around and around and around and then just lets it go.

The second he does, the threads fly everywhere. Around the room, up to the ceiling, against the walls, and—terrifyingly—straight into my friends and me. I expect them to wrap around us, maybe even to bind us, but in the end, what happens is so much more bizarre. The threads pass straight through us.

I feel them under my skin, slicing through muscle and blood, veins and bones. It doesn't hurt, but it does feel incredibly strange, like a million dragonflies zinging through every part of me. But when I turn to Hudson to see if he's okay, to see if the threads are hurting him, he's just standing there like he doesn't have a clue what's happening.

Macy looks the same. So do Jaxon and Flint and the others. None of them has a clue that the Historian just pushed these things, whatever they are, straight through our skin.

Seconds later, the strange zinging stops inside me. Frantic, I look around, trying to figure out what happened, and realize the strings have passed right through us. I can see them behind Macy and Hudson now—thin and delicate as ever as they continue to sweep around the room, going through whatever is in their path.

"I'm impressed," the Historian says to me. "I didn't know if you'd be able to see them. But apparently, you're the real deal."

"What does that mean?" I ask. "And why can't the others see the strings?"

"What strings?" Flint asks, and he's back to sounding pissed—which is to say, normal these days.

The Historian just rolls his eyes at him. "It's a god thing," he tells me, like that explains it.

Before I can ask him any more questions, he gives his knitting needles one more big drumstick spin. They disappear mid-flip, because of course they do. Forget surf bum and crotchety old man. I'm beginning to think the Historian is a frustrated rock star.

"Now what?" I ask, because I still haven't seen anything happen in that top right corner of the cave he was looking at earlier.

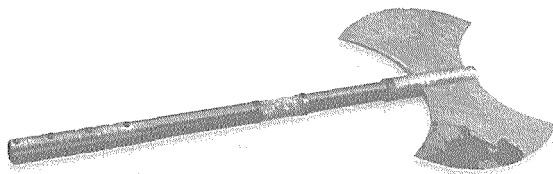
"Now?" He raises both brows. "We wait."

"Wait?" Jaxon asks. "For what?"

The Historian grins, and somehow it's even scarier-looking than his frown. "You'll see."



## Big Bang Me



I don't know what his "you'll see" means, but it doesn't sound good. Especially when he follows it up with, "In the meantime, Grace, we need to have a talk."

"A talk?" I ask, nerves churning in my already-jumpy stomach. "About what?"

"Your newfound power. You can't just go around using it will-o'-the-wasp whenever you feel like—"

"Will of the wasp?" I ask, feeling like I missed something. "What do wasps have to do with anything?"

"I think he means will-o'-the-wisp," Hudson answers softly.

"Okay, but that still doesn't make sense." I shake my head. "I'm not the one who froze time for the whole world." I point at the Bloodletter. "She did."

"Well, it's just good, sound advice, isn't it?" he asks archly. "But also, you're the one who tore through her magic like a kid in a candy store and ripped a hole in time."

"I don't want that to happen again, either. Not even sure how it *did* happen," I tell him, wringing my hands.

"Because you don't know the basics of controlling your power, obviously," Jikan accuses.

"Stop harassing the child, Jikan," the Bloodletter admonishes, then turns to me and says, "He just doesn't want to admit that we can control time, what with him lording it over everyone that he is the *God of Time*." She says that last bit like he'd made up the title and she's humoring him.

"You do *not* control time, Cassia." Jikan bristles, and they go into another Wild West staring contest—that the Bloodletter apparently wins, as his shoulders finally lower and he admits, "Chaos controls the arrow of time. Nothing more."

"Wait. I can travel in time?" I ask, the first inkling of excitement about possibly being a demigod curling in my stomach. I'd love to go back in time and

meet Kafka. Ask him why the fuck it had to be a cockroach. I had nightmares for weeks.

Jikan straightens his spine, standing to his full height before declaring, “Only the God of Time can surf *those* waves.”

It’s such an absurd statement that I can’t help but giggle a little.

“We can control the *flow* of time, Grace,” the Bloodletter explains.

Jikan nods. “Time flows from order to entropy, and in that sense, as a demigod of chaos, you can start and stop it, to some degree, but nothing more. If you were smart, though, you would never do either, because I won’t be so nice the next time I have to show up to fix one of your mistakes.”

He was nice this time?

“But if ‘all she can do’ is start or stop time,” Hudson says, adding air quotes and tossing me a wink, “which I happen to think sounds pretty impressive, then how did she rip a hole in it?”

Jikan turns to the Bloodletter, and they have some kind of silent conversation with their eyes, because after a bit, he sighs heavily. Then he says, “She just did. And it’s like I said earlier. When you make cracks in time, you leave openings for all kinds of unsavory things.”

“Unsavory how?” I ask as a chill works its way down my spine. “What kind of bad magic are we talking about?”

“It’s not all bad,” he tells me. “It’s just problematic—for me, for Cassia, and eventually for you, too.” He glances around the Bloodletter’s sitting room, shaking his head. “Now, I have a wave with my name on it. But first”—he nails me with a hard gaze—“a warning. Time is not to be messed with, least of all by a baby demigod. Do it again, and I will halt my truce with your grandmother and unfreeze your kin.”

I gasp. Hell, we all gasp. Everyone except Hudson, who just narrows his eyes on the Historian. He’s basically threatening to kill my entire species if I don’t play nice, which is just rude as fuck. “I can’t make that promise! I don’t even know how I did what I did that brought you here today!”

Hudson moves to wrap an arm around my shoulders, but I’m beyond needing comfort. I’m pissed.

I put my hands on my hips and lift my chin. “If you don’t want me messing with your precious strands of time, then help me save my people. Because if you don’t, if you’re willing to watch thousands of people die just to prove a point, I will spend every day of my life fucking with time. You will be knitting your fingers to the bone fixing the shit I plan on breaking.”

I draw in several quick breaths, my hands shaking that I just played chicken with a god and pretty sure I'm now about to be smited. Or smote. Smitten? Either way, honestly, enough is enough.

"Grace—" The Bloodletter tries to calm me down, but I'm way too worked up for that.

"No!" I tell her. "I'm serious. For once, why don't you precious gods try leading with the truth? For once, why don't you try telling us what we need to know instead of making us bumble around in the dark until someone dies? I don't mind doing what has to be done, but I am damn sick of watching the people I love die or get injured because we never have the full story. So if you ever want to see a dolphin again, tell us how to save my people!"

I pause to take several more deep breaths, and Hudson adds, "She's right." Then he wades in even further, because he's Hudson and he always, always has my back. "You can get pissed off and snap us to another plane of existence, but it doesn't negate the fact that Grace is right. The Bloodletter says she just needs to use her green string, but you see what happens when Grace touches it. Mayhem."

"Well, that's because she's just a baby demigod of chaos. Stop touching your string until you mature." Jikan says this like it's obvious.

"I. Am. Not. A. Baby." In fact, what I am is seething right now.

But Jikan rolls his eyes. "I wasn't calling *you* a baby. But you are a baby demigod, although I'm not sure how." He turns to the Bloodletter. "Did you do this? Stop her godhood from growing?"

His question turns my anger to ice, and I slowly turn to face her. "Did you do something else to me?"

The Bloodletter shakes her head. "It wasn't me, child. I released your magic the day your mother came to me with you in her womb. Someone else stopped the seed of your magic from growing until recently. It's there, but it's wild, and young, and hungry. It is pure chaos, with no direction, no focus, and no control." She shakes her head in disappointment. "It will grow if you give it time, but unfortunately, it's clear you're not strong enough yet to remove the poison from the Army with it."

The fight slowly drains out of me as quickly as it came. I was so busy being afraid of what would happen if I touched my green string, I didn't even consider *nothing*.

But Hudson is having none of it. "You consider what Grace just did to this cave weak? Hell, Jikan here says she tore a hole in time itself. And you think she needs to be stronger?"

"This isn't even a fraction of what Grace will be capable of one day," the Bloodletter replies, pride evident in her voice. "But she must first learn to walk before she can run."

"Well, there's one way—" Jikan begins, but the Bloodletter interrupts.

"No."

Again, some kind of silent conversation goes on between the Historian and the Bloodletter, ending with the Bloodletter giving one hard shake of her head and the Historian shrugging. Which makes me angry again, and I bite out at the Bloodletter, "You won't let him tell me how to save my people? Your *mate's* people?"

"You can't, Grace. Not this way. You don't have enough power yet." She actually sounds like it might matter to her what happens to me, but I don't care. There are thousands of gargoyles frozen in time, gargoyles who will never age, never have children, never truly live, unless someone saves them. I may not think I'm ready to be the queen of this Army, but I'm all they've got, and I'll be damned if I don't go down trying.

"Thanks for underestimating me, *Grand-mère*." I draw the words out with a smirk, echoing how Cyrus did the same to her all those years ago.

And I must have struck a chord, because she holds my gaze for a beat, shame in her brilliant green eyes, then she turns to Jikan and says, "Tell her."

He folds his arms across his chest. "There *is* something that can defeat this god-killer weapon, an antidote to all poisons called the Tears of Eleos." He shakes his head. "But Cassia is right. The only one I know of during this time is impossible to reach."

"What does it do?" Eden asks. "How do we use it?"

"And where do we find it?" Flint follows up.

"It restores life when you drink it," the Historian answers. "If you want it to save your Army, merely let it coat your gargoyle strings. As for where you find it...St. Augustine, Florida, of course."

"Florida?" I ask incredulously. "The key to defeating the most powerful poison on earth is in *Florida*?"

"Where did you expect it to be?" he answers. "Mount Olympus?"

When he puts it like that, Florida seems as good a place as any.

He stands up and surveys the cave's ceiling with satisfaction. "Everything is fixed, and my luau doesn't start for another ten minutes. Perfect timing. As always."

"Wait, that's it?" Macy asks in disbelief. "That's all you're going to tell us?"

That we need to go to St. Augustine, Florida?”

“Well, that, and to be careful. What you need is not meant for human or baby—er—*young* demigod hands. It is guarded by a powerful, ancient creature that knows no nature except death, for what better way to protect life than with its antithesis? It cannot be reasoned with—it cannot be defeated.”

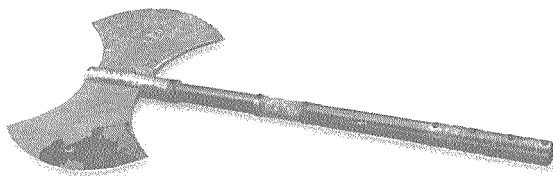
“Sounds easy,” Hudson says facetiously.

“If it were easy, everyone would be doing it,” the Historian tells him—and of course, that sounds about right. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a pig to carve.”

Before I can think of anything to say to that, he reaches into the opening he’s created in the middle of the air and plucks one of the gossamer-thin threads.

And just like that, everything goes black.

## Shoppe Till You Drop



“Where are we?” Macy asks when the darkness disappears as suddenly as it came on to reveal we’ve all been *moved* to a different place.

“I don’t know,” Eden answers, glancing around at the row of small buildings and cobblestone road. “But it’s pretty cool.”

“What’s cool about a bunch of old buildings?” Flint sneers. But he’s looking around like the rest of us, taking it all in.

Thankfully, it’s still dark—or mostly dark—the sun just a hint on the horizon. That means Hudson is okay being out here, at least for a little while, which is a good thing because I still have no idea where we are. Except to know that Flint is right—we are surrounded by a bunch of old buildings.

The sky is still painted the dark purple of predawn escapades, but the area around us is lit up by quirky gas-lamp light posts. We’re in a narrow cobblestone walkway between old buildings with wooden balconies strung with lights. Each floor of each building has a sign hanging in front of it, and that’s when I figure out that we’re in an old-time market.

On either side of us, there’s a chocolate shop, an antique shop, a milliner’s, and a rare bookstore that I can’t help drooling over, and a little farther up the cobblestones are a restaurant, a cute old-time pub, and a toy shop. All the shops are dark right now, since it’s so early, but in another time when the lives of hundreds of Katmere students and my entire species aren’t hanging in the balance, I would love to come back and walk this whole marketplace.

For now, though, I’d settle for figuring out where we are.

When I say as much to my friends, Macy answers, pointing to a nearby sign. “We’re in St. Augustine, Florida.”

“Is that what he did to you?” I ask Hudson as we find a map at the end of the walkway. “Just snap you to a different place like this?”

“Different place, different time. It was impressive, actually.”

“That’s why you weren’t mad when you got back.” I shake my head. “You looked impressed, but I couldn’t figure out why if he snapped you out of existence.”

“Not out of existence. Just to a tiny island somewhere as the sun was getting ready to come up.” When my eyes go big, he laughs. “Yeah, the threat was implicit but very much there.”

“So now that we know we’re in St. Augustine,” Macy says, pointing to the top of the map that reads ST. AUGUSTINE HISTORIC OLD CITY SHOPPES, “what are we supposed to do next?”

“Figure out where the ‘old and powerful magic’ shop is?” Flint suggests, tongue in cheek.

“Not to mention the fact that it’s going to be light soon,” I add, glancing at the sky. “Hudson needs to be out of here before the sun comes up.”

“What Hudson needs is to stop drinking your blood so we can actually get shit done,” Eden mutters.

I duck my head as my cheeks flame. I mean, she’s probably right, but getting called out on it in front of everyone is super embarrassing. The fact that only vampires who feed on human blood can’t go into sunlight for a couple of days turns out to be the world’s most inconvenient hickey. Forget turtlenecks, Hudson needs a full hazmat suit...and I need a very deep hole to hide in.

Hudson wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me close. “What we need,” he says in his most proper British accent, “is to stop getting jerked around by gods for their own amusement.”

“Yeah, but since that’s not going to happen anytime soon, I’m with Eden,” Jaxon answers. “Lay off your own personal bloodmobile. At least for a little while.”

“Of course you would say that,” Flint taunts. “No ulterior motives in there for you, huh, Jax?”

If possible, my cheeks get even redder. All I want to do is figure out what we’re supposed to find here in St. Augustine—and do it before the sun comes up and fries my mate to hell and back. And honestly, after that, I want to have a sit-down with Flint and give him a big hug—and then tell him he has got to let this anger directed at everyone go. Every time he lashes out, I’m reminded how much pain he’s truly in, and I’m afraid he’s going to do something reckless one day that will get him killed.

“Seriously?” Mekhi says. “Our classmates are in the hands of a madman, and you guys are going to stand here fighting about stupid shit? Can we please focus on the goal for more than three seconds at a time?”

“What is the goal again?” Macy asks. “I mean, besides getting everyone from Katmere back. What is the goal here? Because I didn’t see anyone asking how to find my mother back in that cave.”

Her words punch my stomach like a heavyweight champ, and I gasp. She’s right, too. I promised Macy if we went, I’d ask the Bloodletter about her mother, and I didn’t keep my word. Shame heats my cheeks that we spent that entire trip asking about me and how to save my people.

“If we find a cure for the Army, then they will help us free everyone,” Hudson answers. “We cannot defeat my father alone—especially not now that we’ve learned as long as the Army is frozen, he’s immortal, too.”

I hold up my hand for a visual aid. “This Crown thing only works with the Army, and we know it scares the shit out of Cyrus, so...”

“Then let’s figure out how to find these Tears of Eleos and save everyone, including Macy’s parents,” Jaxon jumps in, sending me an apologetic look. “It’s probably some magical sapphire pendant or something.”

“Worn around the neck of a mindless killing machine,” Mekhi adds with a grin, like facing down a bejeweled beast sounds fun.

“By all means, then, let’s find its hidey-hole and jump right in,” Flint says, a half grin flashing across his face and reminding me for just a second of my old friend.

“Well, I don’t think Jikan would have gone through the trouble of sending us all this way only to make us have to travel farther,” Hudson muses, staring at the storefront Jikan dropped us right in front of.

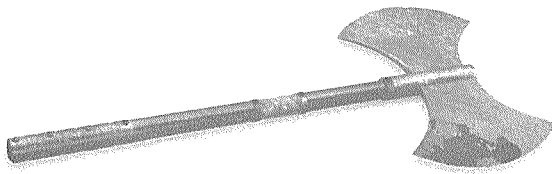
“And that means what exactly?” Eden asks. Then she turns to see what Hudson is staring at and says, “You can’t be serious.”

When I see what he’s looking at, too, I have to admit, I’m with Eden on this.

“A taffy shop?” I ask. “The place that holds the magic of one of the most powerful, ancient gods in the world...is a saltwater taffy shop?”



## Not So Laffy Taffy



I can't help thinking Hudson might be right, though, as I scoot out from behind Jaxon to get a better look at the taffy shop. The glass-paned windows are covered in posters of various illustrations of monsters, with a wooden sign above the window proudly proclaiming the name of the shop: MONSTER TAFFY. "Whoever owns it believes in truth in advertising."

"Or making taffy out of creatures," Mekhi deadpans.

"I'm just saying, if there's a dragon-size taffy vat in there, I am out," Flint agrees.

"To be fair, if there's a dragon-size anything in there, we should probably all be out," Macy shoots back. "I know this crowd isn't big on it, but survival of the smart-enough-to-run-like-hell is a real thing."

"Are we going in or what?" Jaxon asks, striding toward the pink-cotton-candy-colored door.

I squeeze Hudson's hand and move to stand with Jaxon, only to find Hudson hell-bent on doing the same exact thing.

Jaxon looks at us in surprise, but Hudson shrugs. "Somebody's got to be brave enough to be the distraction so the survival of the run-like-hell crew can actually happen."

Everyone chuckles at this, even Flint, just like Hudson meant them to, and the tension of a moment ago begins to roll off our shoulders. Just one more reason why I love this guy so much.

In the end, I'm the one who pushes open the door. And I'm the first to step into what feels a whole lot like a Brothers Grimm fairy tale.

The four walls of the store are a giant mural of a starry black sky looking down on dozens of leafless white trees. I know it's impossible for a tree to look like it's in pain, impossible for a tree to *be* in pain, especially a painted one, but something about these trees screams agony to me. They are bent and twisted and

gnarled, their very existence a testament to the darkest side of those fairy tales.

And the tree theme doesn't stop there. Life-size statues of trees—all twisted and warped and sad-looking—are scattered around the store. Hanging from their branches are clear plastic globes filled with every color of taffy imaginable.

I don't think it's my imagination running wild when I say that they look like poisoned apples—so much so that I can't help but look around for a magic mirror on the wall. Turns out, I don't have far to look. There's a very large, very ornate mirror on the wall at the back of the store, and right in front of it is a matching golden chalice with diamonds on it sitting on a stone pedestal next to the checkout station. A checkout station that is currently being manned by one of the most spectacular women I have ever seen.

She's tall—several inches taller than Hudson, in fact—with pale skin, bright violet eyes, and straight black hair that nearly touches the floor. Her curvy figure is poured into black pants and a matching vest, and her thigh-high boots are black leather circled with silver chains and charms. She wears half a dozen chains around her neck and twice as many rings on her fingers—all of which have some kind of magical symbol on them. Her nails are long and pointy and the same dark-red shade as her lips.

In other words, she's pretty much the sexiest wicked witch to ever walk the earth. It's a look that is definitely not lost on my friends—or my mate—considering Jaxon, Hudson, Macy, and Eden are staring at her like she's a fantasy come to life while Mekhi and Flint look absolutely terrified.

I'm somewhere in the middle—scared but intrigued—so that when I feel an inexorable pull toward the front counter, I don't even bother to fight it. I mean, we *are* here to talk to her...

But I've only taken a few steps before Macy reaches out and grabs my elbow. "Don't," she orders in the sharpest voice I've ever heard from her.

"What's wrong?" I ask, trying to figure out what she's so worked up about.

"You need to wait until she invites you to speak to her."

My brows shoot up. "Is that some kind of witch etiquette I don't know?"

"She's not a witch," Macy whispers.

"You're right, she's not," Eden agrees. "She's not human—I can smell the magic on her—but I can't figure out what kind of paranormal she is."

"Then how do you know I can't approach her first?" I ask. "This *is* a shop."

"Common sense?" Hudson queries softly. "It doesn't take a genius to figure out she's more than capable of eating the whole lot of us for her daily

tea and still have room for dinner. I have a strong sense why this shop is named ‘Monster Taffy.’”

Hmm. Maybe he wasn’t as entranced by her as I had originally thought.

Macy clears her throat impatiently, and I turn my attention back to her. “Because the sign says so?”

She points to a black sign labeled RULES hanging right next to the mirror on the front wall. And as it turns out, rule number one really is, “Wait to Be Asked Before Approaching the Counter. No Exceptions.”

“Okay, then. I guess we’re waiting even though we’re the only ones in here.”

I step back to join the others on the black *X* near the front door, where we wait. And wait. And wait.

Precious minutes pass, minutes when dawn begins to break across the sky with its streaks of orange and red and yellow. A part of me is freaking out—Hudson can’t be out in daylight until my blood is fully gone from his system. The only hope is that when we’re finished, Macy can portal us out of here.

Several more minutes go by as we wait for her to look up from the crossword puzzle she’s doing. But after her initial glance at us when we first walked in, she hasn’t looked up once.

*What the hell?* I mouth to Macy as Hudson shifts restlessly beside me.

My cousin shrugs, but she doesn’t look like she’s in any hurry to disturb her. Neither does anyone else, except maybe Flint and Jaxon, who just look impatient. But I’m too scared to send either of them up there to ask, because let’s be honest, they’re both more the *demand answers* not *ask questions* sort—which will get them eaten, most likely.

I guess that means it’s up to me. Fan-freaking-tastic.

After a few seconds of looking at her really hard and willing her to look up doesn’t work, I finally bite the bullet and clear my throat.

She doesn’t so much as blink.

I clear my throat again, a little bit louder this time.

Still nothing.

“Grace—” Macy starts, but I cut her off. Enough really is enough.

“Excuse me—”

“Scram.” She says the word with absolutely no inflection.

“I’m sorry?”

The woman doesn’t bother to look up from her crossword when she answers, “Not yet, but you will be. Now go.”

“But we need—”

I break off as her hand shoots out and slaps against the Rules poster. One dark-red nail points directly at rule number two: “We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone for any reason.” The fact that she does this while filling in an answer on her crossword at the exact same time makes the move extra impressive. Or maybe it’s just that she’s done it so many times before that it’s muscle memory by now.

Either way, I’m not going anywhere until I at least get to talk to someone. I clear my throat one more time. “I’m really sorry, but—”

“You already said that.” And then she yawns and doesn’t even bother to cover her mouth.

It’s a move I know well, and I glare at Hudson, who tries to pretend he has no idea what I’m upset about. But the tiny little grin playing around the edges of his mouth says everything.

Apparently, there’s a handbook out there somewhere titled *How to Be a Paranormal Asshole*, and both she and my mate have read it. Then again, underneath it all, Hudson is a really amazing person. Maybe she is, too.

The thought bolsters me—along with months of confronting Hudson at his most assholish—and I decide to just go for it. Besides, I’ve already been threatened once today, by a god who thought smiting me was a reasonable option. After that, any other threat seems like not that big of a deal.

After taking a deep breath and pasting on my sweetest, most nonthreatening smile, I walk across the stained black concrete floor and don’t stop until I’m right in front of the register. I try not to let it bother me that she stares at me with unblinking violet eyes the entire time.

“Are there rocks in your ears, gargoyle?” she demands after trying—and failing—to stare me down. “Or do you have a death wish?”

“Neither,” I answer. “I’m just desperate.”

“Desperation has no place here,” she answers. “It will only get you killed.”

“It’s a taffy shop. I don’t think the candy cares if I’m desperate or not.” God knows some of those trees look pretty desperate to me.

“All right, then.” She holds her arms out wide. “What kind of taffy would you like?”

“Um, taffy?” It’s not the question I was expecting.

She lifts a brow. “This is a taffy shop. And since I assume the vamps and dragons back there aren’t planning on eating any, then yes. What kind. Of taffy. Would. You. Like?”

Wondering if this is some kind of test, I look back at the trees and the

plastic balls of colored treats hanging from their branches. "Can I have one of each kind, please?"

"Amateur," she answers with a snort.

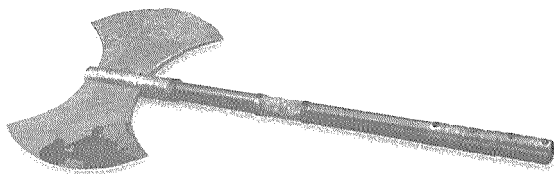
Then she reaches into the basket behind her and pulls out a large plastic globe filled with what looks to be every color taffy the store offers. She drops it on the counter between us and says, "That will be thirty-five twenty-six, please."

"Oh, right." I fumble for the front pocket of my backpack where I always keep my wallet, but Hudson is already there.

He drops a hundred dollar bill on the counter. "Keep the change."

She laughs. "No shit."

Then she scoops the money, her pen, and her book of crossword puzzles and heads for the door at the back of the shop. "Have a nice day," she calls over her shoulders with a laugh that chills my blood.



“That went well,” Macy comments from her spot by the door.

“I didn’t see anybody else stepping up, so...” I trail off as I pick up the globe of saltwater taffy and spin it between my hands. “What are we supposed to do now? Try every piece until something happens?”

“What exactly do you think is going to happen?” Flint demands. “You’ll magically be filled with knowledge about ancient gods and their ancient magical weapons?”

“Hey, be nice,” Macy scolds him. Apparently, I’m not the only one who has noticed his less-than-sterling attitude lately.

“That *was* nice,” he replies.

Not going to lie, his response sets my teeth on edge. And maybe if we weren’t in the middle of something this important, I would call him on it. But right now, we have bigger things to worry about than Flint’s foul mood, and the last thing I want is to be derailed now that I’ve finally got the taffy in my hands.

A glance at Hudson shows him watching me, trying to gauge what I’m thinking and feeling. He must figure it out, though, because he doesn’t say anything. Instead, he simply glances from me to Flint and back again. I have no doubt there was a warning look in his eyes when he glanced at Flint, but I appreciate the fact that he’s letting me handle it my way. The last thing any of us needs right now is a fight between the two of them.

Eden must agree, because she jumps in before Flint has a chance to say anything else obnoxious. “You can throw that candy away. It won’t do anything.”

“How do you know that?” Mekhi asks. “We haven’t even tried one.”

“Because she wouldn’t have given it up so freely if it had any value,” Macy answers matter-of-factly.

“Great.” I look down at the candy with distaste. “So what am I supposed to do with all of this now?”

"Just leave it on the counter," Jaxon tells me.

"What's plan B? Or are we on plan G now?" Eden asks, glancing at her phone and placing one black boot on the edge of a low shelf. "It's almost seven a.m."

"I know," I tell her. "Believe me, I know. But we need this antidote to free the Gargoyle Army—"

"Screw the Gargoyle Army," Flint shoots back. "I'm sorry, but they've been trapped in stone for a thousand years. A couple more days won't hurt."

"No, but going after Cyrus without backup will." I shake my head. "I know this sucks. I know you want to get to the Vampire Court. We all do. But we've fought Cyrus before, and it hasn't exactly gone well. We need backup to have any chance."

"If we can sneak in there and free the kids and the Katmere instructors without him figuring it out, we'll have a shit ton of backup to help us get out of the Court. The Witch Court agreed to help us if we freed the kids," Macy argues. "We just need to get in undetected. Who cares how much noise we make getting out?"

"And if we get caught?" Jaxon asks. "Who's going to rescue them then? Rescue *us*?"

Macy makes a noise deep in her throat. "You can't keep making that argument no matter what we say."

"Sure we can," Hudson says. He's leaning a shoulder against one of the eerie black walls, but the intensity in his eyes belies the casualness of the pose. "You've never lived with Cyrus. You've never actually seen him in action. You've certainly never gone up against him. So we can absolutely keep making the argument that if we try it on our own, we're going to get our asses kicked. Been there."

"Done that," Jaxon chimes in.

"Got our asses handed to us," Hudson finishes.

"Yeah, well, you lived to tell the story," Macy says. "That's enough—"

"*Some* of us lived," Flint grinds out. "The part you keep forgetting is that some of us didn't. And I'm ready to show Cyrus some goddamn payback."

Macy nods. "And you're also forgetting my *mother* is in there." Her voice wobbles. "She will help us—"

"You mean the mother who abandoned you years ago and has been hiding out with Cyrus ever since?" Jaxon's words are harsh, but he's not wrong. As much as I want to help find my aunt, everything in me is urging me that we need to save the Army if we have any chance.

"There's no need to attack her," Eden snaps at Jaxon but then turns to Macy

and says more softly, "I'm sorry, Macy. He may have said it in a dickish way, but he's right. We don't really know which side your mom stands on or why. And I, for one, am tired of attending funerals. We need help."

"I can't believe you—" Macy starts.

"Enough." Jaxon puts an end to the argument with a slash of his hand, every bit the vampire prince I first met. "We're here now, and we're going to see this through."

"Fine." Macy looks pissed as she crosses her arms and leans back on her heels. "Tell me how you're going to do that, and I'll stop arguing about heading straight to the Vampire Court."

"I'm just going to ask her," I say. "I mean, seriously, what's the worst she can do?"

"Eat your beating heart out of your still-warm body," Mekhi suggests.

"Disembowel you and feast on your entrails," Flint adds.

"Decapitate you and use your head as an ornament for one of these hideous trees," Macy finishes.

When we all turn to stare at her in surprise—torture isn't usually my sunny cousin's modus operandi—she just shrugs. "Oh, come on. You've seen that woman. Do any of you really believe she isn't capable of all those things and worse?"

I have to admit, it's a fair point. But standing around here bickering isn't going to get us anywhere, and Eden's right about one thing. Time is ticking by. The longer we leave all the Katmere students and teachers at the Vampire Court, the more likely it is that something terrible is going to happen to them.

So instead of hanging back and trying to reach a consensus, I put my money where my mouth is. I duck behind the counter and knock on the door the woman disappeared through a few minutes ago. Hudson is behind me in a heartbeat, followed by Jaxon and Macy nearly as quickly. But the truth is, I didn't expect any less. We may fight, but I've got to believe in the end we've got each other's backs.

Several seconds pass and no one comes to the door, so I knock again, a little harder and more insistent this time.

Still no answer.

"Screw it," I mutter and reach for the door handle. One way or the other, I'm getting answers.

I expect the door to be locked, but it isn't. The knob turns smoothly under my hands, and the door swings wide.

I don't know what I'm expecting to see when I open the door—a storage



room or a human sacrifice altar are just a few of the things that flit through my head. The woman who sold me the taffy seems capable of either—and anything in between.

What we find, though, is something so far beyond what I could ever have imagined. The taffy shop opens up into a short hall with a couple of doors on either side, the length of which leads to a giant round arena in the vein of the Colosseum from ancient Rome. The ground is made up of grass and dirt, and while there's no one on the field yet, the stacked stands are packed with paranormals of all kinds.

It makes no sense—we saw this area from the outside when we were looking for the taffy shop, and there was nothing here but more stores. How on earth could there be a giant coliseum that none of us saw?

“Is it a Ludares field?” I ask.

“I don’t think so,” Hudson answers. “It’s not the right shape. Ludares fields are rectangular, and that’s a circle.”

“So what happens here—”

“I’m impressed, gargoyle.” The woman is back, only this time she’s dressed in a form-fitting sports jersey that has the name *Tess* on the front in huge block letters, along with 3,695 written in much smaller numbers. The same black harness belt completes the look. “I didn’t think you had it in you to open the door.”

“It was unlocked,” I tell her. “I mean, it wasn’t hard to get in here.”

“Actually, that’s where you’re wrong.” She makes a clicking noise in the corner of her mouth. “For someone who isn’t immune to magic, it’s very hard to turn that door. Pretty damn impossible, actually.”

She steps back and sweeps an arm out to encompass the field. “So what do you think?”

“I don’t know what I’m looking at,” I answer.

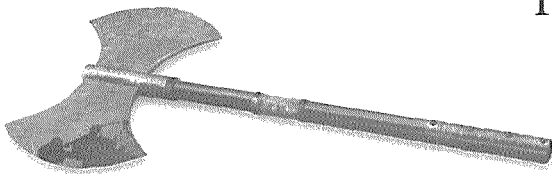
“You’re looking at what you came here to find,” she says. “Obviously.”

“Actually, I think there’s been some mistake. We’re looking for—”

“What everyone is looking for when they come to St. Augustine, Florida. The Fountain of Youth. This field is how you get to try to earn it.”

## 56

## Trial by Misfire



“Wait a minute.” Jaxon steps in, looking as bamboozled as I feel. “You’re telling us the Tears of Eleos that Jikan told us about is really the Fountain of Youth?”

Tess raises one brow. “Or the reverse is true.”

But Jaxon doesn’t miss a beat. “And we need to play a game to get this... thing?”

She laughs and tosses her long black hair behind her. “More like you need to prepare to suffer like you’ve never suffered before. But sure, you can call it a game to win the elixir if it makes you feel better.”

“I don’t understand,” I say.

Now it’s her turn to look confused. “You mean Jikan really didn’t tell you anything about the Impossible Trials? That’s amusing.”

Well, this sounds promising. I mean, we already defeated an Unkillable Beast and beat an Unbreakable Curse. What’s an Impossible Trials for our group? Hopefully not impossible. “No, he didn’t,” I say to Tess. “But I’m guessing by the name of the Trials, you’re implying that to seek the Tears could result in death at any moment? Cute.” But it’s not cute at all.

Neither is it cute that a god chose to leave out important details when sending us on another quest. I really need to get a T-shirt that says: *I prefer to work in the dark*. You know, to match the tattoo on my forehead.

I roll my eyes and glance at my friends, hoping they have a clue, but I’m actually a little shocked to see their faces looking just as surprised as mine probably does.

I turn back to the taffy maker and say, “All he said was that there is some powerful antidote in St. Augustine, Florida, that would help us deal with a god-killer poison.”

It sounds convoluted when I say it out loud to someone who isn’t in my

group, but the look on her face says the Historian was right on, even if he was a total jerk about giving us the details.

“He mentioned it’s protected by an ancient creature, so we’re here to slay a monster, take the elixir, and save an army.” Which sounds even more convoluted than my previous statement, if I’m being honest, but I lift my chin anyway.

She just kind of shakes her head. “And I was actually starting to like you.”

“The fact that we don’t know anything more about the Trials changes that how exactly?” Flint asks.

“Well, it increases your chance of death from ninety-nine-point-nine percent to a definite one hundred, so...” She sighs. “Yeah, definitely no point getting attached.”

“That’s some interesting math you’ve got going on there,” Eden comments.

“Math based on experience is the most accurate kind,” Tess counters. “And I’ve had a lot of experience watching people compete and suffer.”

“Why do paranormals love to watch their kind die in stupid contests?” I mutter. I’m just so over this. From Ludares to fighting the giants to get out of prison, it’s all getting a little ridiculous. And bloodthirsty.

“Oh, this arena and stands haven’t always been here, gargoyle.” She answers what I thought had been a rhetorical question. “People have been searching for the Tears—the Fountain of Youth—in this place for more than a millennium. Eventually humans started expanding into the area, so we hid it even more. Turns out, it’s a huge moneymaker watching the most foolish of our kind try to win as well.”

“You mean die,” Flint bites out. “You like watching people die.”

She glares at the dragon. “I never say what I don’t mean. Everyone who comes to watch is rooting for someone to succeed, to win in the face of overwhelming odds. It’s all I’ve *ever* wanted.”

“Well, then, you won’t mind humoring us,” Hudson says. “What exactly are the Impossible Trials, and why is the probability of death so high?”

Tess looks like she’s thinking about whether or not she wants to answer, but in the end, she shrugs and says, “The Trials are how you get to the Fountain of Youth, of course. They’re a series of tests that makes the seeker prove that they have the skill, the power, and the heart to break the curse and release its ancient magic.”

I shiver at the word “curse,” and my gaze meets Hudson’s. He twines his hand in mine and squeezes, then leans into me and whispers, “We beat unbreakable curses for breakfast.” And I flash him a quick smile.

“With a ninety-nine-percent death toll, I’m going to assume the Trials are dangerous,” Macy comments.

“One hundred percent death toll,” Tess corrects. “I said you had a ninety-nine-point-nine-percent *chance* of dying. And honestly, that’s just me being optimistic because I’m convinced someday someone will actually succeed.”

“One hundred percent death toll?” I ask as fear settles in the pit of my stomach. “You mean *no one* has ever survived the Trials before?”

“Of course not. Why else would we still have the Tears here? It’s a one-and-done kind of elixir. If someone actually won, I would finally get to hang up my taffy-making instruments.”

I don’t know what to say to that, and it’s pretty obvious that the others don’t, either. Silence reigns, but just when it looks like Tess is about to bid us farewell, Hudson asks, “So if we decide we want to compete in the Trials, what is it we need to do exactly?”

Tess’s response is immediate. “You shouldn’t compete.”

“Yeah, I think we’ve figured that much out,” Hudson tells her. “But what if we have to compete?”

“Well, if you have to, then you have to, I suppose.” Again, she starts to turn away.

“No, what he means is, how does it work?” I ask. “Do we sign up? Do we all get to compete together? When would the competition begin? How do we know if we win or lose one of the tests?”

“Well, the competition begins whenever you choose to challenge it. Anytime, day or night. You know you’ve won if you’re still alive at the end, and you know you lost if you’re dead,” Tess answers. The fact that she does so with a straight face and every semblance of being serious makes me even more concerned *and* confused.

“As for the other questions, no more than twelve can compete at once. You walking onto that field is sign-up enough, and—” She glances at her watch. “The competition can begin as soon as you’re ready.”

This time when she starts to walk away, we let her go. Not because I’ve given up on the idea of competing for the cure for my people but because we need to at least discuss what we’re going to do. I feel like everyone needs to be completely on board before we risk our lives for what sounds like a nearly impossible chance at survival.

But surprisingly, Tess only gets a few steps away before she turns back to me. “Find another way, Grace.”

I startle that she knows my name. “I don’t think there is another way. That’s the problem.”

“When one path leads you to certain death, there’s always another way,” she tells me. “Your power is strong, but it’s new, and it’s changing, and that is a detriment to you. Right now, you lack the confidence to wield it, and that will get you—and your friends—killed.”

“My friends have power, too. They’ve had it longer and can control theirs better.” I don’t know why I’m arguing with her, except I’m looking for a reason to stay here. Looking for a reason to actually go through with a plan that is looking more and more foolhardy by the second.

“You’re right. There’s a fair bit of talent in all of them. But their power doesn’t compare to what I sense is growing in you, and you are the one who is uncertain.”

“That—”

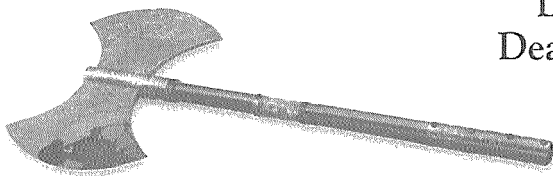
“Come back some other time, Grace. You’re not ready for this.” She taps the number on her shirt. “3,695 people have competed. None has survived. Let’s not make it 3,701.”

A sudden lump appears in my throat, and I have to cough several times before I can actually speak around it. “What if we choose to compete anyway?”

“Everyone thinks they’re going to win, kid,” she replies. “Otherwise, we’d never get out of bed.”

This time when she leaves, none of us even tries to stop her.

Dead If We Do,  
Dead If We Don't



“So are you ready to head to the Vampire Court?” Macy asks, more than a little sarcasm in her voice.

“We haven’t made a decision yet,” Jaxon growls.

“Oh, really? Because I’m definitely okay with not being the 3,696th person to die,” Macy fires back. “And you should be, too.”

“She’s got a point,” Mekhi says. “It feels pretty shitty to just throw our lives away on Trials we’re not sure we even need to complete to free the kids and stop Cyrus.” He turns to me before I can jump in and adds, “Yes, we all want to free the Army. I was all for this plan if we had a shot at freeing them, but it sounds like the only thing we have a shot at here is getting dead.”

Which brings up another point. Why *did* Jikan send us here? He knows I’m in no shape to control my power or compete. But I can’t help shaking the feeling he had a reason. Of course, like every god I’ve ever met, he just didn’t bother to give me the big picture.

“But—” I start to say, before Macy interrupts me.

“No, Grace.” She grabs my hand. “My mother is in the Vampire Court, and I refuse to believe she’s there willingly, that she left me willingly.” Her eyes well with tears. “I have stood by you and your decision to free the Army, but now is not the time. We need to focus on those in danger *today*. The kids. My dad. My mom.”

And oh God, my heart cracks open and my eyes fill with instant tears. How did I forget about Uncle Finn—that Macy stands to lose *both* her parents if we don’t rescue them? I know *exactly* how it feels to lose both your parents at once, and I cannot allow that to happen to my bubbly and innocent cousin. She deserves all the pink dreams and rainbows this world has to offer.

Which is why I am even more certain freeing the Army is our only chance at saving them. “If your mom has been there for years, we have to believe she’s

in no immediate danger, Macy. And Cyrus is stealing ‘young’ magic—so Uncle Finn is most likely alive to keep the children calm.”

“You don’t know that!” Macy cries out.

“No, I don’t know it for sure, but it makes the most sense.” I squeeze her hands.

“I agree,” Hudson says as he holds Macy’s gaze. “Your parents are okay, Macy. We will get them out.”

I take a deep breath and shrug the tears wetting my cheeks off on my shoulder.

“Let’s head back to the lighthouse and make a plan,” I suggest. “Maybe if we get the Order to come back with us, Tess will say we have better odds at winning.”

Jaxon starts to say something, but his phone beeps with a very specific text alert, and he holds up a hand as he pulls his phone out. “It’s Byron,” he says, and then he’s scrolling through a series of messages as they come in.

“What’s going on?” Eden asks, and for the first time since I met her, there is real fear in her voice. “Is everybody okay?”

It’s what we’re all wondering, and we wait in agony for Jaxon to finish reading the texts.

“They know where the kids are,” he says after the longest minute on record.

“That’s good, right?” Eden asks.

“Yeah,” he answers, but he sounds completely distracted.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, reaching out to put a hand on his arm for support.

“What aren’t you telling us?”

He glances from me to Hudson and Macy, then back again. “He’s not just holding them hostage. Marise wasn’t lying. He’s—” He shakes his head, and this time he’s the one who has to clear his throat. “He’s stealing their magic. Draining them completely. Anyone whose parents aren’t loyal to the cause.”

The entire group of us recoils in horror.

“Can he—can he do that without—” I break off, not wanting to say it out loud any more than Jaxon did.

“It’s possible to do it without killing them,” Macy says, her words thick with grief. “It’s not easy, though. He’d have to...” Her voice cracks.

“He’d have to torture them.” Hudson says the words that none of us wants to say. His tone is flat, but his eyes are alive with so many emotions that I can’t begin to untangle them all. “He’d have to break them.”

Macy cries out, and her knees must buckle because she starts to go down. Eden catches her and holds her up with a hand on her elbow. She bows her head,

takes a deep, shuddering breath, then says, “We have to go. *We have to go.*”

“I know,” Jaxon agrees. “Just give me a few minutes to figure out—”

“They don’t have a few minutes!” Macy rages, breaking away from Eden. “If you won’t go, I will. I’ll—”

“Die before you ever find your mother,” Hudson tells her.

I shoot him a *what the hell* look, but he just gives me a *you know I’m right* look right back. Then he turns to Jaxon. “You said the Order knew where Cyrus was holding them.”

“They do. They’re in the dungeons. Near the...” Jaxon trails off, his eyes locked with Hudson’s.

Whatever he’s not saying hits Hudson like a body blow. He doesn’t flinch, but I’m watching him closely and can see the impact of it roll over him. His eyes go flat, his breath stutters, and his hands clench into fists.

“Near where?” Macy asks, her voice shaking. “Just tell me where I’m building a portal, and I’ll get us there.”

“The Crypts,” Hudson answers. “It’s where he does all this kind of work.”

“He’s done this before?” Flint speaks up for the first time, and for once, he doesn’t sound angry. He sounds terrified.

“He’s tried.” Hudson shoves a hand through his hair, and I wonder if he even knows he’s trembling a little. “It never worked before, but maybe he’s figured something out that we don’t know.”

“But why?” Flint asks. “Why would he steal magic from children? And not just from other types of paranormals, but from vampires as well?”

“I don’t know. The Bloodletter said his real power is trapped with the Gargoyle Army. Maybe he’s trying to replace it or needs more to free it. Whatever the reason, rest assured the only thing people in power ever want is more power,” Hudson continues. “And I can only guess what he’ll do when he gets enough of it.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, afraid I already know the answer.

“To wage a war against humans that he can finally win,” Hudson tells me. “What he’s been working toward my entire life.”

I turn to Hudson and Jaxon. “Can you get us into the Vampire Court without Cyrus knowing about it?”

“No,” Hudson answers immediately.

“Well, then, we’re screwed,” Eden interrupts. “Because we can’t go in there guns blazing. At least not without the Witch or Dragon Court at our backs.”

“And we know both Courts can’t or won’t help,” Flint adds. “So we’re on our own on that front. But I still say we go.”



“And to hell with what comes next?” Jaxon asks, and it’s clear we’re at an impasse.

Flint, Macy, and Mekhi face the rest of us, and I’ve never felt more certain that no matter what we do—we’re doomed if we do it divided like this.

“Why don’t we head back to Ireland, get some food and rest, and figure out our next move with clearer heads?” I suggest, trying to breathe some calm into the situation. “Rushing into anything is only going to get us all killed. And besides, we really need to wait until dark anyway to make a move, right?”

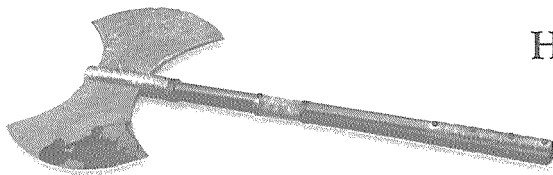
“Kids are being *tortured*, Grace,” Macy accuses, and gone is my sweet, always smiling cousin who would follow me anywhere. In her place is a desert of disappointment stretching between us that I’m not sure how to walk across and reach her again. But I know I have to try.

I squeeze her arm. “And we *will* save them. And your family. I’m just suggesting we take a moment and figure out our next move instead of rushing to our deaths. We will end up saving no one if we don’t.”

I plead with her with my eyes, and eventually, her shoulders relax and she gives me a quick nod. “I’ll build a portal to the lighthouse.”

As she pulls out her wand and begins the necessary steps to open a portal, I can’t help but notice she never agreed with me.

## The Walk of Hell Yeah I Did



“Hi there, sleepyhead,” Hudson murmurs, and my eyes flutter open as he sinks down on the bed beside me.

It takes me a second to remember where we are. The lighthouse. “What time is it?” I ask, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

“You crashed as soon as we got back. It’s a little after six in the evening.”

I shoot straight up. “You shouldn’t have let me sleep that long!”

He smiles, smooths a curl off my forehead and behind my ear. “Hey, I learned a long time ago never to get between you and a bed when you’re sleepy. You had a lot of revelations to process. Your body knows what it needs. Besides, like you said, we can’t make a move until night, and we only slept four hours before heading to the Bloodletter’s Cave.”

Have we really slept so little? It’s odd how I’m getting used to this frantic exhaustion, this thickness in my blood, as though my body has already accepted what my mind has not. That this is the new normal and there is nothing I can do about it.

And if I’m feeling this way, I can only imagine how the others are handling the stress and sleep deprivation. Maybe that’s why we can’t find a way through this mess we’re in. We’re too locked in personal survival mode to connect the way we usually do. No wonder everything feels like it’s crumbling beneath our feet. We’re on the edge of the abyss and there’s nothing left to keep us from falling in. “I’m worried, Hudson. We’re never going to defeat Cyrus if we don’t work together.”

He nods. “Everyone agreed to meet back here at seven to strategize, so don’t stress, okay?”

For the first time since leaving the Witch Court, the knot in my stomach starts to ease, and I lean back against the pillows again. I sigh and close my eyes, praying that Macy is willing to hear me out now. That Flint can see beyond his

anger and need for revenge. That Jaxon can convince the Order to help us win the Trials.

“You can sleep more if you need to, babe. You’ve got at least another hour before everyone gets here,” Hudson says, and my eyelids flutter open again, my gaze connecting with his warm blue eyes, a half smile lifting up one corner of his mouth.

He’s got an arm braced on the mattress, caging me in, and I just lay here and take in the view. His blue dress shirt is unbuttoned and hanging open, displaying washboard abs above a pair of low-slung jeans. His hair is wet and lying across his forehead in careless waves, and he smells strongly of the amber and sandalwood shower gel I love.

“No, I’m awake now,” I tell him, burrowing my face against his outer thigh even as my hand wanders up to stroke his warm, flat stomach.

“Oh yeah?” he says, and there is a decidedly interested note in his voice that wasn’t there before. His accent is thicker than normal as he asks, “And what should I do about that?”

“Get between me and a bed?” I deadpan, then feel my cheeks warm. I roll out of bed before he can notice.

“Hey!” He catches my hand. “Where are you going?”

I give him the closest thing to a sexy look that I have in my repertoire, enjoying the way his breath hitches in his throat as I do. “To brush my teeth,” I answer, right before I dart into the bathroom and slam the door, thrilled we’ve settled in a different bedroom than the one missing a wall into the en suite since my green-string debacle the day before.

I come back out five minutes later—teeth brushed and face freshly scrubbed—to find Hudson stretched out on his side of the bed looking hotter than anyone should ever have the right to look.

For the first time, like, ever, he hasn’t bothered to fix his hair into its normal pompadour, so it’s laying soft and tousled against his forehead, curling slightly on the ends as it dries. He hasn’t shaved yet, so he’s got a little bit of stubble on his jaw that I am suddenly dying to kiss, his jeans-clad legs are crossed at the ankles, his feet bare, and he’s got one arm bent behind his head, further opening his dress shirt and giving me a view that has my mouth watering and my fingers itching to touch.

The tiniest tips of his fangs peek out over his full bottom lip while his eyes—burning a dark, hot blue—track my every movement as I walk back toward the bed.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out he knows exactly why I was in such a rush to brush my teeth, and I hesitate, wondering what I should do next.

Normally, I'd crawl back under the sheets and let Hudson take the lead, but there's something vulnerable about him lying there, waiting, watching, letting me decide where this moment leads that makes me want to seize control for just a little while.

So instead of climbing in on my side of the bed, I walk around to his, conscious as I do of his eyes following me the whole way, like the predator he is. Too bad for him that I'm not the least bit interested in being prey right now.

I take my time getting to him, enjoying the promise of what's to come. Enjoying even more the fact that for once, he's the one shifting in anticipation, the one holding his breath as he waits to see what I do next.

I finally stop right next to him, my gaze locked on his. When I make no move to join him, though, he pulls his hand from behind his head to reach for me, but I evade him easily.

That has him quirking a brow, his skin flushing and eyelids growing heavy. But he makes no move to touch me again.

As a reward, I lean over, smiling to myself as he lifts his lips for a kiss. But that's not where I want to taste him, and I move just a little lower, so that I can press warm, open-mouthed kisses against the pulse thrumming in his neck, taking a quick bite in exactly the same spot he loves to drink from me before nibbling my way down the center of his body.

"Grace." His voice is gravel, his hands twisting in the bedsheets before I ever get past the very top of his eight-pack.

"Hudson," I mimic as power thrums along my nerve endings, and I slowly, slowly, slowly kiss my way back up to his collarbone, his jaw, his perfect, perfect lips.

He groans the moment our mouths meet, and I take instant advantage, nipping at his bottom lip before delving inside his mouth, licking, tasting, devouring the heat between us. He's like sweet summer rain against my tongue, and I let myself get lost in the moment. Lost in him.

At least until he starts to roll onto his side and pull me into him. Then I dart back, giving my head a quick shake as we draw in ragged breaths.

"Oh, it's going to be like that, huh?" he asks with a wicked smile.

"Not *like* that," I tell him. "That."

And then—because I can't wait any longer, either—I climb onto the bed, onto him. My knees settle on either side of his hips, and I rock against him, my

hands stroking all that glorious, glorious skin of his even as I lean down and take his mouth with mine again.

He groans, deeper and hotter this time, and his hands move to cup my hips and ass.

“Not yet,” I tell him, prying his stroking fingers away from my body even though there’s a part of me that wants nothing more than to let him do whatever he wants to me.

But this is my time to explore Hudson, my time to find out about all the things he likes. So I twine his fingers in mine and lean forward until I can press his hands into the mattress next to his head, pushing my weight down to hold him immobile as I hungrily take his mouth with mine.

Fire and electricity and need roar through me as I kiss and touch and explore all the sweet and sexy parts of my mate. Of Hudson. My Hudson.

And he lets me, leaving himself completely at my mercy even as his breathing grows harsh, as his eyes go dark and tormented.

Even as sweat coats his chest and his body arches and trembles against mine.

Even as he starts to fall apart, begging me with his mouth, with the low growls in the back of his throat, with the relentless hunger in the slide of his tongue against mine to take whatever I need.

Which is why I give him two more quick kisses before pulling back just enough to gaze into his storm-swept eyes. And what I see there squeezes my chest like a vise.

Hudson looks stripped bare. Open and vulnerable in a way that makes my breath catch.

Because this is Hudson, wicked, wild, wonderful Hudson, but in all the time we’ve been together—all the time we’ve laughed and fought and loved—he’s never once looked fragile.

But today he does. Today he looks like one wrong move from me, and he’ll shatter like porcelain.

It scares me even as it makes me want to wrap myself around him and tell him it’s going to be okay. That I’ll never hurt him. That I’ll always, always catch him if he falls. But I can tell he’s too far gone to hear me.

So in the end, I do the only thing I can. I cede my newfound control and offer all that I am—all that I have inside me—to him, telling him with my body instead of my words that I know exactly what he needs right now to feel safe again.

I release his hands and set him free.

He takes over in a flash, his fingers tangling in my shirt for one wild moment

before he rips it in half and tosses it over his shoulder, shrugs off his own clothes. And then he's everywhere. His mouth, his hands, his body—over me, beneath me, beside me, inside me. Every part of him touching, holding, taking every part of me until I'm drowning in sensation. Drowning in him.

And nothing has ever felt so good.

Maybe that's why I arch against this boy I love more than my own life, why I slide my hands around his neck and cup the back of his head, why I tilt my head to the side and wait for him to take what I'm offering.

Because who knows when—or if—we'll ever have this chance again.

My desperation must communicate itself to him because he rolls me over and sinks deep. Ecstasy tears through me even before he scrapes his teeth over the upper curve of my breast. He lingers there for long seconds—teasing me, tasting me—before slipping through my skin and into my vein like he belongs there. Like he was made to be there always.

Satisfaction roars through me. Once, twice, then again and again as Hudson moves against me.

It swamps me, pulls me under, turns me inside out and upside down, until it's impossible to know where he ends and I begin.

Until he is all that I know and all that I need.

Until there's nothing left but love and heat and the agony of always wanting more.

We explode like the sun, burn like a supernova, and as he takes me over one more time, all I can think is that the physicists are right.

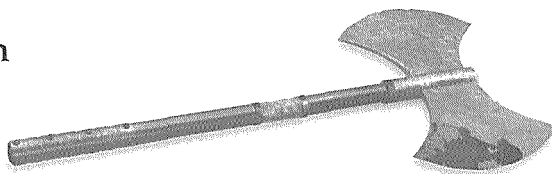
We really are made of stardust.

Which is why, when Hudson eventually pulls me against his side, tucks the cool sheets around our bodies as our breathing slows again, I can't help the fear that starts to twist in my stomach that this was it, our last perfect moment before all hell breaks loose.

So when the bedroom door suddenly bangs open and Jaxon fades to the end of the bed, a part of me isn't even surprised.

"We have an emergency," Jaxon bites out. "They're gone!"

## The Old Bait-and-Ditch



Having your ex barge in after you've had possibly the best sex the world has ever known—with his *brother*—is just wrong. I yank the sheets tighter under my chin and wait for the hole I'm praying for to swallow me.

"Dude," Hudson drawls, and Jaxon turns around so fast, it's almost comical.

"Umm, yeah, like I said, they're gone," Jaxon repeats.

Hudson slides his arm out from under my head and throws his legs over the side of the bed. He leans down to grab his discarded clothes, shoving one leg in, then the other before standing up and replying, "Who is gone?"

I glance at my clothes scattered around the room. My jeans are in a pile beside the bed, and my T-shirt is—my gaze darts from the floor to the dresser to the fan?—apparently hanging from the fan. Well, what's left of my shirt. Honestly, it looks more like a rag now, the two sides rent in pieces from Hudson's enthusiasm earlier. I shoot him a raised brow, and he shrugs as he zips his jeans but leaves the top button undone.

And I know Jaxon is standing there. I know he's trying to tell us something important. I know we have life-and-death situations we need to be thinking about. But still—my mate in his low-slung jeans, the tapering of hair just above the open button, those washboard abs, the baby-blue dress shirt he pulls on but leaves unbuttoned so my eyes can gobble up the rest of him—until my heated gaze collides with his smirk. I should be embarrassed he knows the exact effect he has on me, but I lick my lips, and his breathing suddenly matches my own ragged breaths. And just like that, the match that's always poised between us is lit again.

My heart is pounding against my chest, my blood singing in my veins. For Hudson. Always for Hudson. And if his breathing is any indication, his heart is beating just as fast for me.

My mind dances with ideas of shoving Jaxon out of the room and having my

wicked way with my mate again, but I keep forgetting I'm dealing with vampires. And they have exceptional hearing.

"For fuck's sake, you two. You sound like you're about to have a heart attack." Jaxon shakes his head and walks toward the door. "I'll give you sixty seconds to get dressed and meet me downstairs. Shit has gone sideways." And with that, he fades out of the room, the door snicking closed a second later with a hushed click.

Hudson runs a shaky hand through his hair that's dried tousled across his forehead, his shield gone. "For fuck's sake, woman. You're gonna be the death of me." I love it when he's so overwhelmed, his accent thickens. Even better, his tone is filled with wonder. I feel ten feet tall and can't help smirking at him for once. Which he catches and fades to me in a blink, caging me between his arms as he leans forward and kisses me quick and hard.

"There is no way I'm gonna let my brother think sixty seconds is enough time for"—he gestures at the bed—"us. So get up and get dressed." And then he plants another quick kiss on my lips before disappearing down the stairs.

I chuckle under my breath, hop out of bed, and quickly grab clean clothes, then stare at my wild curls in the mirror. There's no time for a shower, and brushing them will just make matters worse, so I grab a hair tie and pull the mass into a quick ponytail. Satisfied this is as good as it's going to get in sixty seconds, I head downstairs to find out what was so urgent, it had Jaxon barging into our bedroom. I can't even imagine who he was referring to who's gone now.

As I round the bottom stair, I hear Hudson grumble, "The fucking wankers."

"What?" I ask, joining him across from Jaxon and Eden. "What's happened?"

"Macy, Flint, and Mekhi portaled to the Vampire Court while you were... 'showering.'" Eden adds air quotes around the last word, and I blush. But then her words actually sink in...

And I'm so shocked, my eyebrows nearly hit my hairline. "Macy is gone?"

"I tried to stop her," Eden says. "But she was certain that no matter what, you would want to save the Army before saving her parents. She wasn't mad about it. Said she totally understood...and that you'd understand she couldn't risk losing both her parents."

My stomach sinks. "I can't believe Macy really thinks I would miss an opportunity to save Uncle Finn and Aunt Rowena. They are the only family I have left!" I throw my arms out wide. "But just because you want to save someone doesn't mean you *can* save them. At least alone. We need help. We need the Army."

Eden's eyes narrow on me. "Can you honestly tell me you only want to save



the Army to have backup to save the kids? Or do you just want to save them because you're their queen?"

I start to protest, but Eden holds up a hand to stop me.

"As the gargoyle queen, you have every right to put your people first, Grace," she continues. "And maybe that's not what you're doing. But I can see why Macy would feel differently. Can't you?"

"If you believe that, then why didn't you go with them?" Jaxon asks.

Eden shrugs. "Just because I question your true motives in trying to save the Army doesn't mean I don't agree we need *someone* to have our backs. The Dragon Court is in disarray, the Witch Court refuses to help, the Wolf and Vampire Courts are in alliance with Cyrus, there's no real rebellion except the eleven of us, honestly. And now we've learned there are apparently even gods who have no interest in helping us. I agree with you. Our best chance was the Army."

"Was?" I ask her.

But Hudson answers, "We won't survive the Trials with just the four of us, Grace."

And I know he's right. It was seriously iffy we had a chance with the whole gang. Now? There's only one thing we can do now.

"We have to follow them. No matter what we were going to agree to do next, I knew it had to be together," I say, and by the looks on everyone's faces, they agree.

A part of me is so mad at our friends for deserting us, for not talking this through, but the truth is, I don't know if they could have convinced me not to save the Army first. I also don't know if Eden's right, if I only want to save them because I feel responsible for their lives, or if I truly believe we need them to defeat Cyrus. But I am honest enough to admit I was convinced I was right.

I twist the ring on my finger, the weight almost too much to bear, but I know no matter what my reasons, I can't focus on my people right now. I have to save my other family.

I blow out a long breath. "So does anyone have any ideas for how to break into the Vampire Court and not die a horrible death?"

Hudson nods. "The one part of the Court Cyrus never visits, the one part he has no idea about, is the servants' quarters. And my lair is right above the south side of those quarters."

"If we get caught, you'll be handing the keys to your *lair* to Cyrus," Jaxon warns.

The brothers exchange a long, devastating look that I don't understand. Then Hudson shrugs, shoving his hands deep in his pockets. "If it's the only way

to get in, the only way to keep our friends and Dawud's brother and everyone else alive? I'll risk it." He swallows, jaw clenched and throat working. Then he says faintly, "And to hell with what comes next."

"Of course," Hudson continues sheepishly, "we'll need to wait until dark to travel. I'm assuming our only ride is Eden, and I don't think she'd like a crispy vampire on her back."

"What makes you think I want *any* guy on my back?" Eden fires back and nudges him with her shoulder, a half smile playing across her face.

Hudson snort laughs. "Fair enough."

I don't hear Eden's next comment as an idea tickles the back of my mind. I turn to Hudson. "Do you think you could sketch the layout of the Vampire Court for me? If the kids are near the Crypts, and we have to enter through the servants' quarters, I'd love to know how far we'll have to travel—or more importantly, how many guards we might need to avoid."

Hudson raises a brow. "You have an idea?"

"Yeah." I nod. "But it feels like a really bad one."

Jaxon chuckles. "Well, we know how much Hudson loves those," he says, referring to Hudson's comment earlier at the Bloodletter wanting to try her bad idea.

"Hey, if it ends up with an ice spike near a certain dragon's nether regions, I'm not opposed this time," Hudson teases.

Jaxon stiffens and changes the subject. "So what's this bad idea, Grace?"

"Well," I say, "I could freeze guards by brushing against my green string—not holding it—and allow us to sneak right past." I mean, I think I could. Well, in theory. I swallow hard as I admit nothing "in theory" seems to be going as expected.

Eden's eyes widen with respect. "Hell, girl, this sounds like a fantastic idea! What's not to love about it?"

"You mean other than accidentally bringing the Vampire Court down on our heads?" I toss back, wringing my hands. "Also, Jikan said he'd unfreeze the Army if I ever played with time again."

We're all silent as we consider this possibility, but eventually Hudson says, "I don't think we have to worry about him if you freeze a couple of guards, Grace. You've frozen and unfrozen us before, albeit unintentionally, and so has the Bloodletter, and he's never said a peep. As long as you don't grab your demigod string and tear a hole in time, I think we're safe."

I nod. That's exactly what I was thinking, though that doesn't mean it doesn't

still frighten me to consider. But then I think of my cousin, desperate to save her parents. Flint in pain over the loss of Luca and his leg. Mekhi, who's had my back since the first day I arrived at Katmere, likely sick and tired of his Court's role in his friends' deaths, too. And I know it's the right decision. I let my friends down not showing them how important their needs were to me, as important as my own, and I have no intention of letting them down again.

If Cyrus gets his hands on them, I have no doubt he will torture them first and steal their power for their part in the massacre on the island. Which is something I am willing to risk almost anything to prevent.

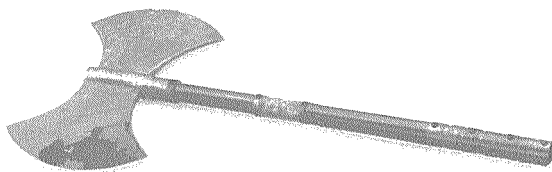
"So how about that sketch?" I ask.

Eden pulls a notebook out of her backpack and hands it to Hudson with a pen, and we all settle down at the kitchen table to familiarize ourselves with the layout of the Vampire Court.

I glance around at my other three friends, dread knotting my stomach. Because of choices I made, our group is shattered, and I have no idea how to put it back together again. More, I'm desperately afraid that by breaking apart, we are giving Cyrus exactly what he wants. And if that's the case, I don't have a clue how we're supposed to get out of this alive.

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## Kicked to the Curb Appeal



After sunset, Eden flies us from Ireland to England and glides in as close to the Vampire Court as we dare go, which is a nearby hotel. We hop off in an alley, Eden shifts, and Hudson directs us down the street and around a corner. After a couple of blocks, his long strides pick up speed, and I know we must be getting close to his lair.

“Now that we’re almost there, are you going to tell us how we’ll get from your lair to inside the Vampire Court?” I ask.

“We’re using an age-old method,” Hudson says as we take a sharp left turn into a new alley.

“Oh God,” Eden says. “Tell me we aren’t going to have to go through any of London’s sanitation tunnels.”

Hudson looks affronted. “What kind of mate do you think I am?” he demands. “I’d never make Grace wade through human waste.”

“Wow, thanks,” Eden teases him.

Jaxon joins in. “At least we know where the rest of us stand.”

There’s a lull in the conversation as they wait for Hudson to deny it, but he just looks at them out of deliberately bland eyes. I know he’s teasing, but I can tell they aren’t so sure. Which apparently works for him, as he never straightens anyone out.

We turn around another corner into an even darker, narrower alley, then walk down it about halfway until we get to a dark, narrow house. It sits back only a few feet from the sidewalk, a rusted wrought-iron gate leading up three short stairs to a dingy gray door.

There are wrought-iron bars over boarded-up windows, too, and the paint is chipped and peeling in several places.

“*This* is your lair?” Eden asks, looking at the place with distaste. “Even the sanitation tunnels look better than this place.”

"Don't judge a book by the paper it's written on," Hudson tells her.

"I...have no idea what that means," Eden answers, looking confused.

"It means—" Hudson rolls his eyes. "Never mind what it means. Just get me that plant, will you, Grace?"

He points to the saddest, sickest-looking fern I've ever seen. The thing is withered almost beyond recognition. Even its once-white pot is pathetic-looking, chipped and cracked and stained brown in various spots.

"What is this poor plant going to do for us?" I query as I pick it up.

"What did I just say about books and paper?" he answers, reaching into the pot and pulling out a key. "Watch your step—a couple of the boards are rotten out here," he tosses over his shoulder as he bounds up the stairs and onto the crumbling, decrepit porch.

"Only a couple?" Jaxon comments as he sidesteps a cracked board.

Hudson is too busy unlocking the four padlocks on the front door to answer. He pulls off the last padlock, throws the door open, and walks inside.

We pile in after him, eyes wide as he flips on a light, and we take in a living room that somehow looks even worse than the outside of the house.

I wait for him to tell us he's joking, but instead he just heads toward a bookcase at the back of the room. It's my first clue that this place might actually belong to him—the thing is packed to the brim with old books—but it's still hard to imagine him choosing to live here, like this.

The others must feel the same way, as neither of them has moved since he flipped on the lights. They're both just standing in the center of the room, taking in the awfulness.

There's a lot to take in.

To begin with, the furniture is so worn that I'm pretty sure the only things holding it together are the stains. The carpet is torn in several places and stained in several others. The truly horrible yellow velvet wallpaper is faded and peeling, and the curtains look like an entire pack of wildcats climbed them in a fury.

As I move to get a better look at the wallpaper, I can't help thinking that story I read junior year by Charlotte Perkins Gilman suddenly makes a lot more sense. If I was locked in here with this stuff for any length of time, I'm pretty sure I'd go mad, too.

"This is your house?" Jaxon asks. I kind of feel the need for clarification myself.

"It is," Hudson answers with no hesitation. Seconds later, there's a loud screeching sound as he uses one hand to push the loaded bookcase several feet

closer to us.

"Why?" The look on Eden's face is half horrified and half fascinated, which I totally get. This is so not Hudson in any way.

But he just shrugs. "You'll see."

I wander toward my mate, curious about what he's doing. Even more curious about his reasoning for this house, because if I've learned anything about Armani Boy in the last few months, it's that he is fastidious to a fault. Every hair in place, every wrinkle annihilated. Even if I ignore that, his room at school couldn't be more opposite this.

Hudson likes his creature comforts and has never made any bones about it.

"What are you doing back here?" I ask as I narrowly avoid tripping on a very large tear in the puke-green carpet.

He dips his head toward the wall and answers, "Watch and learn."

And just like that, things start to make sense. Because behind the bookcase is a giant reinforced steel door, protected by a security code and handprint analysis.

He grins wickedly at me and enters a code before pressing his hand to the analysis plate. Seconds later, the door swings open and reveals a gleaming wooden staircase going down.

"Shall we?" he asks.

"We shall," I answer. This is his plan, after all. And besides, I'm beyond curious about what's in there.

The three of us follow him down the stairs into a huge, open basement—and then stop and just stare. Like his room at school, there are giant bookcases everywhere overflowing with books. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands, lining half the room from its floor to its very tall ceiling. But that's not what has us stopped in our tracks.

We couldn't be more shocked if the space had been decorated in pink sparkly walls and random beanbags.

"This—this looks like—" I don't have any words.

Thankfully, Eden isn't as verbally challenged. "Dude, it looks like Restoration Hardware shot their catalog in here. Their entire catalog."

Yes. That.

The whole room is at least half the size of a football field, the walls not covered by bookshelves painted a pearl white, with lamps and sconces and chandeliers bathing the entire space in soft light. And everywhere the eyes can look is a tasteful mix of rustic and modern pieces, almost exclusively in white, tan, or black. The loftlike space is divided into eight distinct "sections" based

on the strategic placement of rugs and furniture, but each space echoes the same aesthetic.

The first area on our right is clearly where Hudson spends his time listening to music. Two black metal bookshelves filled with albums tower over a scattering of big, comfy-looking tan chairs and ottomans, a massive white shag rug that I'm dying to sink my toes into, a media cabinet filled with sound equipment.

As though none of us wants to miss a single thing, we start to walk through the lair, taking in every detail.

Farther down is obviously his exercise space—more axes, of course, but also several bows and quivers of different types as well as various targets hanging on the walls. Beside this area are two overstuffed white sectionals with ecru pillows on them, facing a massive TV mounted on the wall with a half dozen gaming controllers scattered about the space along with an expensive-looking VR headset. A couple of rustic wooden end tables with lamps and coffee tables holding a smattering of magazines finish the area.

All the way at the other end of the room is a giant brass bed, but unlike his bed at school, this one is done up all in white. White sheets, white blankets, white pillows, white comforter. On either side of the bed are heavy, antique nightstands holding elaborately carved silver lamps.

But for once, it's not the bed I'm looking at. Because the area to the left of the bed boasts an accent wall in a shade of black I'd recognize anywhere. A couch and bookshelves complete the cozy reading area that has my heart racing.

"This is the room I painted when you were still in my head," I whisper.

"It is," he agrees, his voice so quiet, I have to strain to hear it.

"That's why you were so insistent about the color of the walls."

"Armani black," he answers with a roll of his eyes. "I did agonize over getting the color perfect the first time myself."

But there's something in the mocking, self-derisive tone that tells me I've hit a hot button. That there's a lot more emotional volatility to this subject than I would expect.

It's a thought that's underscored by the fact that he doesn't stick around for more conversation. Instead, he walks over to another reinforced steel door, this one with even more security than the previous.

I'm too busy turning around, glancing again at the white bed, white walls, white couches, lamps, and chandeliers, to follow him. Everything about the space screams light and joy—and it's so familiar, it makes my chest ache. The details elude me, but I know in my bones I've been here before. Loved here before. And

let it slip through my fingers like water.

Hudson notices my preoccupation and comes up behind me, resting his hands on my shoulders as he leans in and asks, “You okay?”

His breath tickles my ear, and I let myself sink into him for just a few precious seconds. “This is where we were. This is—” My voice breaks.

“This was our home, yes. For a while, at least.”

I sigh, blinking away the tears that I don’t have time for right now and that I don’t want to shed in front of Hudson. It’s ridiculous to get this upset when we’re mated now anyway.

Or it’s ridiculous if I don’t let myself think about what it must have been like to be Hudson when we first got back to Katmere. What it must have been like to be him when my mating bond with Jaxon showed up again. If I do let myself think about that, if I do let myself dwell on how much it must have hurt him, it breaks me deep inside in a way I’m not sure I’ll ever completely recover from.

A way I don’t have any right to expect him to ever fully recover from.

I think back to the look on his face in bed earlier, the desperation in his gaze that he was mere glass in my hands, and my chest squeezes tight. How hard must it be for him, for someone we all forget too often was raised without an ounce of love in his life, to open up and trust again, when the first time he did...I just forgot about him like he never mattered at all?

“Hey,” he tells me, like he can read my thoughts. “I’d do it all over again to end up here with you.”

“I don’t know why,” I whisper. “After what I did to you—”

“You didn’t do anything to me,” he answers, sliding his hand up to the back of my head and pulling me in so that my face is buried against his chest. “Fate’s a fickle bitch, and so is *Cassia*.” He says her name in such a mocking tone, I know that poking at her with it is going to provide him with entirely too much entertainment in the years to come. “But that has nothing to do with you, Grace. You’ve never done anything but love me—even when you didn’t remember.”

“That’s not true,” I choke out, doing my best to will away the lump of tears stuck in my throat.

“It’s my truth,” he answers. “And it’s what I’ll always choose to remember about you. About us.”

A sob escapes my throat, and I muffle it against his shirt while he strokes a hand through my curls. Other sobs are right there, just waiting to get out, but I shove them back down. Now is not the time, not when our friends—including Jaxon—are in the room with us. And not when our other friends are counting



on us to break into the Vampire Court and help them save those kids and their family from whatever horrors Cyrus has in store for them.

"Grace." He sighs, holding me tight for one second, two.

"It's okay," I tell him, drying my eyes against his immaculate shirt—which I'm sure he's going to love later. "I'm okay."

He grins down at me. "You're more than okay."

I wipe my face one more time, as surreptitiously as I can. Then duck out from behind Hudson to find Jaxon and Eden studiously engaged in something other than looking at us. Which I appreciate even if it does make me feel incredibly self-conscious.

Figuring the best way to get through it is just to get back to business, I ask, "So how do we get to the Vampire Court from here?"

Hudson doesn't answer. But he does walk back over to the super-scary security door at the other end of the room, and after he lets it scan his handprint and his eyeball and enters a security code, the door swings open.

"Who's going first?"

"Into the dark and creepy tunnel?" Eden jokes. "Obviously—"

Jaxon goes first—big surprise—followed by Eden, while Hudson and I pull up the rear after he grabs a small bag out of a chest near the door.

Hudson explains that the tunnel we're in leads from his lair directly into the servants' quarters, which we learned from his drawing leads into the dungeons. As we walk along the narrow shaft, I have to admit it's nowhere near as scary as I expected it to be. To be honest, it's not even as scary as the tunnels I used to take to art class back at Katmere.

It's just a regular tunnel with wooden beams above our heads and rocks lining the walls. The floor is made of pavers and sand, and there isn't a stray vampire fang or even a spider to be found. I'm not sure how it's possible that there isn't even one cobweb, considering we're in a centuries-old tunnel, but I'm definitely not complaining.

I am curious, though. About the tunnel and, more, about how Cyrus is okay with having an entrance like this into his Court—or whether he doesn't know about it.

We turn a corner to the right, and Hudson comments, "We're almost there. Just another hundred meters or so."

"And it's just going to be okay?" I ask. "Cyrus isn't going to have the entrance guarded?" For a man who usually takes care of every detail—to our detriment—it seems odd that he would be so laissez-faire with security. Very, very odd.

“I’ve actually got the same question,” Jaxon says. “If he’s keeping them in the dungeon, won’t he have major security on every entrance?”

“I’m sure he does. But he doesn’t know this entrance exists, so...”

“How does he not know?” Jaxon looks skeptical. “I don’t know him the way you do, but it seems like he would know everything about his Court—even the parts he almost never enters.”

“I’m sure he does. But this is my tunnel. I built it over the course of a hundred years, one centimeter at a time, and he has never found it.”

Well, that explains the neatness. No cobweb would dare darken the heights of a tunnel built for Hudson Vega’s exclusive use.

“Are you sure?” Eden asks. “You haven’t been here in a while, and I’d really hate to walk straight into a trap.”

“At some point, I’m sure we’ll run into a trap or ten,” Hudson tells her. “But not from this tunnel.”

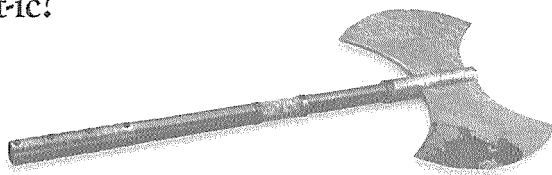
I can tell the others still aren’t as certain as he is, but there’s a power in Hudson’s surety that calms my own nerves. Besides, if I know nothing else, I know that there’s no way Hudson would ever lead me into an ambush.

Besides, it’s not like there’s another way into this place. At least not for us.

About fifty yards up, we run into yet another reinforced steel door with its own security system. It has biometrics just like the other doors, and like the other doors, it appears it can only be operated exclusively by Hudson.

After he’s scanned what feels like twelve different parts of his body, a loud click echoes through the tunnel. Seconds later, the door slides open. And just that easily, we are face-to-face with two very large, very armed members of Cyrus’s exclusive Vampire Guard.

## Why So Cryptic?



“Fuck,” Jaxon mutters, pushing to the front of the group. Already I can feel a fine tremor in the ground beneath our feet. “I told you—”

“And I told you,” Hudson answers, shouldering him aside, “I’ve got this. How are you, Darius?”

He holds his hand out to shake the other vampire’s, and as their palms connect, I can’t help but see the flash of a gold coin changing hands.

“I’m good, Your Highness. How are you?”

“We’ve been better,” Hudson responds even as he moves to shake the second guard’s hand. Once again, I see gold flash between them. “Nice to see you, Vincenzo.”

He ducks his head so that his longish black hair falls into his face. “You as well, Your Highness. But I’ve got to tell you, you picked a terrible time to visit.”

“So I’ve heard.” Hudson leans in, and this time when he speaks, his voice is barely audible even to me, who is standing only a couple of feet away. “Where is he keeping them?”

Relief flashes across the bigger guard’s face—Darius, I think Hudson called him. “They’re in a couple of places. Most of them are in the sublevel waiting for—” He breaks off with a shake of his head. For the first time, I notice there’s sweat on his brow.

“The others are in the wells,” Vincenzo tells him.

“The wells?” Hudson asks incredulously. “Why would he—”

“He puts them there when he’s done with them. They’re isolated, so no one can hear them scream.”

Chills slide down my spine like claws. So Cyrus tortures them, ruins them, then abandons them to scream where no one can hear them? “That’s the worst thing I’ve ever heard.”

Jaxon and Hudson exchange a quick look, and there’s something in their

eyes that has me holding my breath as everything inside me turns to ice. I'm not about to ask for an explanation now in front of everyone, but I'm definitely going to be asking for one later. Because if it's anywhere near as bad as what I'm thinking...

My fists clench. I've never really wanted to hurt anyone in my life, but I am done with Cyrus. I am done with him starting shit that gets people I care about hurt or killed, and I am so fucking done with him doing shit to hurt Hudson and Jaxon. The people I love deserve more than to spend their lives being terrorized by him. One way or another, it's going to end this time, and I'm going to be the one to end it—even if it destroys me.

Hell, I've got a baby demigod string, and I might be afraid to use it, but kicking Cyrus's ass could be just the motivation I need to try again.

"At least they're alive," Hudson says, then asks, "who's guarding them?"

"The dungeons near the crypt were built by the Blacksmith," Darius shrugs. "Without magic or abilities, they're not going anywhere, so it's just a couple of guards on that level, one near the wells."

"Where's everyone else?" Jaxon demands.

"Guarding the entrances to make sure you can't slip in." Vincenzo grins. "I myself am supposed to be on the sublevel entrance with about fifteen other guards."

"And I'm supposed to be on the main level," Darius adds. "But I had a family emergency right around the time your texts came through."

"I appreciate that." Hudson's smile is grim but determined. "Are the stairwells clear?"

"The last I saw, they were, yeah. We did a quick recon while we were waiting for you. The biggest concentration of guards is on the top level, near the king."

"Dear old Dad always was one to cover his own ass first," Hudson says as we start to walk down the hallway with the guards, eyes peeled for any movement or activity. "Is my mother with him?"

"The queen is visiting her sister," Vincenzo answers. "It is my understanding that the screams...upset her digestion."

"Well, we definitely wouldn't want that to happen," Jaxon says with disgust.

Hudson pauses. "And what about the others? Have you seen them yet?"

Vincenzo darts a glance at Darius before telling Hudson, "I'm sorry, Your Highness. They put up a fight but were captured before we could get to them."

I gasp, knowing immediately they're referring to Flint, Macy, and Mekhi. "Are they—" I can barely get the question out. "Are they in the wells?"

My stomach clenches, acid crawling up my throat as I imagine my cousin, my friends, lying in the bottom of a well, powerless and screaming in pain. I feel a little faint and place a hand on Hudson's arm. He reaches up with his other hand and places it over mine.

"No, they're still in the dungeons, Miss..."

"Ah, yes," Hudson says, "forgive my manners. Let me introduce you to my mate, Grace—the gargoye queen."

The two guards snap their boots together and immediately bow deep as they murmur, "Your Highness."

But as soon as they straighten, Darius glances down the hall and back, then whispers, "You should not have come, Your Highness." He's looking directly at me, and an icy chill prickles my neck. "If you are captured, I fear all hope will be lost. He has plans—"

Vincenzo interrupts and addresses Hudson. "We've said too much. We have families of our own to worry about, Your Highness. But be warned, things are very different since you were last here. Cyrus has made powerful allies. Now, let us continue." And with that, Vincenzo begins walking down the hallway again, the rest of us following.

I have so many questions, I don't even know where to begin, but a quick glance from Hudson tells me now is not the time to ask. Instead, I focus on where we're going, keeping a sharp eye for any other guards I might have to freeze quickly.

There are twists and turns every few dozen feet, and I half expect someone to jump out at us from some hidden doorway or wall niche. The others must feel the same, because no one says a word until we end up passing through giant stone archways into a massive chamber.

The light is pretty dim down here, and I'm so busy looking for threats from the Vampire Guard that it takes me a couple of minutes to realize where we are. And, more importantly, what's around us. Namely dozens of concrete tombs, most with elaborate carvings and jewels embedded in the sides and tops.

"Is this what I think it is?" Eden whispers right about the time I figure out where we are.

"It's the royal mausoleum," Jaxon tells her. "It's where members of the royal families are put when we die. And when it's time for our Descent."

"Descent?" Eden asks. "What does that mean?"

Jaxon hesitates. "All vampires are born with speed and strength and several other advantages. But the royal family—and only the royal family—develops an

extra power over the first part of their lives.”

“Power or powers,” Hudson elaborates. “Depending on...” He trails off and suddenly becomes very interested in the tomb we’re standing closest to.

“Depending on what?” I ask. Before he can answer, I turn to Jaxon. “This is why you have telekinesis. And why you”—I turn back to Hudson—“can vaporize things with just a thought?”

“Don’t forget about the persuasion stuff,” Eden says.

“Believe me, I’m not,” I answer. “How did that happen anyway? That Jaxon got one gift and Hudson got two?”

For the first time ever, Hudson doesn’t answer me. Instead, he turns and starts walking toward the end of the mausoleum as fast as he can go without actually fading.

Jaxon stares after him for a second before turning back to me with a sigh. By now, every instinct I have is on high alert. There’s something more to this story than “royal vampires magically get a power.”

Something dark.

And something Hudson doesn’t want to talk about.

Of course, that only makes me more determined to figure it out. If something has my mate this upset, I pretty much figure I need to know what it is.

When he turns and realizes I have no plans to follow him until he elaborates, he runs a hand through his thick hair, leaving a few sections standing up at odds, but he sighs and walks back over to me.

“It’s not that big a deal, Grace,” Hudson finally says. “From the time we’re children, we’re fed blood mixed with a special elixir, half sleeping potion and half something else entirely—which we now know is from the Bloodletter. Then we’re locked inside our tomb down here for somewhere between fifty and a hundred years—”

“Wait a minute.” Eden looks between them, wide-eyed. “You’re locked in a concrete tomb for a hundred years?”

“Pretty much. It’s where the whole vampires-in-coffins folklore comes from,” Jaxon answers, but he doesn’t sound pleased.

“That makes a weird kind of sense,” I say, too horrified at the idea of Hudson or Jaxon locked in a concrete coffin for a hundred years to dwell. “But I don’t get it. They just put you under for a hundred years and you never wake up?”

“No, they wake you up once a month,” Hudson explains. “They bring you out for a day or two, check you over to see if your power is evolving, then dose you again and put you back in the tombs.”

"No," Jaxon says in a voice filled with horror. "That's not how it works. They put you under for a year and then wake you up for a week."

"And that's better how?" Eden asks.

"It's better because the more you use the elixir, the faster it loses efficacy." Jaxon looks stricken as he stares at Hudson. "That's why the time varies so widely between vampires. Some go under for fifty. Others go under for a hundred years. It stops once the sleeping potion stops working.

"Or at least it's supposed to," he adds as he studies Hudson's face.

Hudson shrugs. "It's not a big deal."

"It's a huge fucking deal if they woke you up twelve times a year," Jaxon counters. "The effects would have worn off sometime between year four and year ten."

Hudson doesn't say anything, and somehow that's a million times worse. My heart beats way too fast as I wait for his answer, while my empty stomach threatens to crawl right up my throat. If what Jaxon is saying is true...

"Hudson?" I finally ask when I can trust my voice—and my stomach—to behave. "Is that true? Did the sleeping potion wear off before they let you out permanently?"

"It's fine," he tries to reassure me. "I've always had a vivid imagination and kept myself occupied."

"It's not fine," Jaxon snaps. "Everyone knows they kept you under for one hundred and twenty years. That's—" He breaks off with a shake of his head, like he can't bear to say the words.

But he doesn't have to. I can do the math well enough on my own, and it's more horrifying than I originally thought.

Hudson was forced to spend more than one hundred years locked in a dark concrete box—and he was awake for every second of it.

I wrap my arms around my waist as an even worse thought occurs to me. Possibly the only thing worse than being locked in a tomb for a hundred years—they woke him up once a month, showed him the light he was missing, the world he was denied, and then they put him right back in that cold and dark hell.

My stomach goes from crawling up my throat to full-on somersaulting as I realize the extent to which Cyrus has tortured him, and it takes every ounce of concentration I can muster to keep from having a panic attack right here in the middle of Hudson and Jaxon's sacred family burial place.

And that's before Hudson shrugs and says, "It's hard to complain when I got two kick-ass powers out of the deal."

Yeah, I can't help thinking as we move toward the door on the other side of the tomb. *Two kick-ass powers he can't wait to get rid of.* The thought has my already bruised and battered heart threatening to crack wide open. I think back to his lair, filled with the two things he was denied for a *hundred years*—space and light—and I raise a shaky hand and cover my mouth before I cry out.

“Hey.” Hudson pulls me into his arms, his warmth chasing away the chill in my veins. “Good people have shite lives all around the world, Grace. At least I have you.”

I hug him back, this boy who refuses to let anyone break him, and I am in awe of his strength.

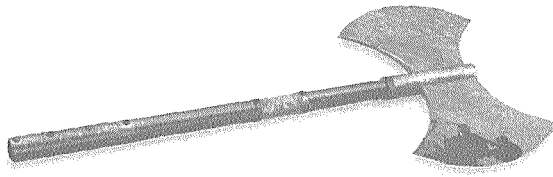
“We need to go now, Your Highness,” Darius urges, and we turn to follow him again, but he stops dead a few feet from the exit, his hands coming up to cup his throat.

“Darius?” Vincenzo rushes forward. “What hap—”

He breaks off as a knife flies straight into the center of his chest. He has one second to issue a surprised, “Oh,” before death claims him, and he falls face forward onto the ground.



## Knife to Meet You



“It’s a shame, really,” a sly female voice comments from the shadows. “I expected them to put up more of a fight. Then again, I guess it’s true what they say. You really do get what you pay for.” Her crisp British accent bites off every syllable.

I whirl around, searching the shadows as I try to figure out who is in here with us. Hudson and the others do the same thing, but it doesn’t look like any of them has been able to spot her, either. Which is concerning, considering the other three can see in the dark.

“Who’s in here with us?” Eden demands, her weight shifting to the balls of her feet in her Doc Martens.

I shiver. There’s something extra creepy about being hunted by someone you can’t see. Especially when that person has just killed two other people right in front of you—people who just happened to be members of one of the most elite vampire guards in the world.

Not wanting to wait until something else happens, I reach inside myself and grab my platinum string. If I’m going to fight some disembodied voice in the dark, I’m going to do it as a gargoyle.

Except nothing happens, even when I give the string an extra-tight squeeze.

I try again, but still nothing happens. Before I can try a third time, the voice comes back—this time from a different corner of the room.

“Did you really think a couple of gold coins were going to keep you safe, Hudson?” She makes a *tsk-tsk* sound. “Honestly, you should know better than that by now.” A knife goes flying by me, so close that I can feel the air it displaces brush against my cheek.

“What the fuck?” Hudson growls.

Seconds later, another knife comes at us. This one just barely grazes the outside of Eden’s biceps.